RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AS SOCIAL EMANCIPATION: AMBEDKAR AND BUDDHISM, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MAHARASHTRA

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CERTIFICATE

It is certified that the dissertation entitled "**Religious Conversion as Social Emancipation: Ambedkar and Buddhism, with Special Reference to Maharashtra**" submitted by **Harish S. Wankhede** is in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University. This dissertation is original and has not been submitted in part or full for any other degree or diploma of any other University. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Contents

Introduction

> A ritual law in which every change of occupation, every change in work technique, may result in ritual degradation is certainly not capable of giving birth to economic and technical revolutions from within itself, or of even facilitating the first germination of capitalism in its midst... It was impossible to shatter traditionalism, based on caste ritualism anchored in *karma* doctrine, by rationalizing the economy.[1]
>
> - Max Weber

The post-independence political culture of India rested heavily upon the ideas and practices of western democratic societies. Under this discourse, ethnic, religious, caste and other parochial commitments of individuals were observed as the expressions of primordial sentiments which are contradictory to the leading ideas of unity, secularism and economic development. To actualize the western ideas in a traditional and conservative Indian society was a difficult task in front of the new political elites as the social terrain was prone to politicize itself because of many unresolved issues. The making of modern Indian Constitution in this respect was the outcome of the western political culture adopted by the nationalist elites in order to attain the goals of economic prosperity, communal harmony and social justice. However in a very small period of time, the optimism built by western ideas was shattered with the rise of different caste, regional and religious political assertions. The caste and regional political movements like Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh and Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) in Tamilnadu demonstrated their opposition to the unitary notions of nationalist political elites and demonstrated the inadequacy of state craft in articulating their political concerns. Also, the advent of Hindu 'revivalism' or militant Hindu nationalism in the last two decades makes it evident that there was a massive contradiction between the rhetoric of secularist elites and the socio-cultural reality of India. The

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[1] Quoted in Jermy B. Massie, (Ed.), *Max Weber: Selected Writings*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1984, pp. 164

contradictions manifested by these 'movements' emphasized on an alternative agenda based on religion and caste identity to brings to the forefront the short comings of western model of social progress.

In the political evolution of modern India no single element has been as pervasive as religion. It has governed in large measure all potential arenas of politics which resulted in creating positive and negative impacts. Firstly, Hindutva as an ideology of upper caste Brahmins sought to mobilize the entire segregated castes under the homogenous 'Hindu' identity to fight against the 'internal threats' (Muslim, Christians and Communists).[2] It gave a negative connotation to the use of religion in the domain of politics. Secondly, Mahatma Gandhi utilized the notion of religion with a 'religious' interpretation of Hindu texts and provided a humanist and a moral view of religion in public sphere. He sought to create a secular domain, in order to break down the walls of communal exclusiveness and bring every community into the fold of one union for the progress of the whole nation. Thirdly, the protest movements of Dalits[3] also derive the ideological support from the domain of religion. Different from the above-mentioned usages of religion into public sphere, the social and political movements of Dalits observe that the broader social system of Hindu religion is the responsible factor for their economic backwardness and social degradation. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the main proponent of Dalit rights in the first half of twentieth century, argued that the *Manuvadi* laws and regulations had sanctified the compartmentalized and hierarchical Hindu social system. On 16th October, 1956 he along with his millions of followers converted to Buddhism and wrote a new saga of protest by reconstructing an ancient Indian religion to fight the obscurity of Hinduism.

Hindutva, Gandhism and Dalit protest movements worked in the same period but separately with a broader objective to change the existing socio-political nature of Indian society. These expressions over the usages of religion have developed a

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[2]M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, Banglore, 2000, pp. 177-195

[3]Dalit is a Marathi term meaning, "Broken men". The Dalit Panthers Movement in Maharashtra used this term synonymous to pride, dignity and self-respect. In the modern Dalit literature "Dalits" represent struggling untouchables and tribals against caste oppression.

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triadic relationship of state, society and religion: Hindutva as a doctrine for state craft, Gandhism for a humanist version of religion and Dalit protest movements for a society based on social justice and equal rights. Making religion as the common element of deliberation, all the above mentioned political streams have emphasized on distinct areas, which makes religion an arena of conflict in modern history of India. The contemporary politics of India has been disturbed because of the growing tendency of political actors to bring religious and caste symbols to perpetuate their ideological goals. Communalism and politics of caste is the outcome of such usages which have a narrow and limited vision and thus have failed to bring any possible change.

The Dalit movement under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar had a radical and constructivist approach. In the process of his social and political activism and in his various writings on religion he had developed a coherent account of the nature of religion and its relation to politics and power. He argued that Hinduism is a religion of rules, a compendium of ritual regulations which are based on caste ideology of hierarchy and untouchability.[4] He saw Gandhi's social reform program ineffective and argued that untouchability in Hinduism is an inherent feature and a defining characteristic of caste system. He also viewed that the political structures have its own limitations in combating the omnipotent Hindu caste system. As a strategy to rise above the existing discourses on religion and to provide a modern philosophical doctrine for social change, Ambedkar proposed religious conversion to Buddhism as his alternative to the world. Ambedkar viewed religion as a force for social change, as a compulsory element to build a bond between the members of community and as a guarantor of freedom and a social life with dignity to every individual. This, he found to be possible only by adhering to the Buddha's doctrine. The present study engages with the debates and contexts in which Ambedkar developed a comprehensive strategy of conversion to Buddhism. Conversion is seen here in the context of broader debates on in politics like State, ideology, identity, secularism, culture and community.

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[4]Timothy, Fitzgerald, Ambedkar, Buddhism and the Concept of Religion, in S. M. Michale (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi 1999, p. 120.

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The current discourse on Buddhist conversion in India has been dominated by sociological-anthropological perspectives which attempted to see the impact of conversion in a narrow framework of 'change' brought up in the individual's psychological aspirations[5], in the rituals of community[6] and concerned to the characteristics of converted community or individuals. These studies concentrate on social elements and have a comparative approach to derive results. In our study, Buddhist conversion is seen as a political project of Ambedkar which was employed by him to build a religio-cultural and philosophical alternative against the existing dominant socio-political streams of the same period. Buddhism is regarded as a complimentary base structure to develop the democratic and secular character of the modern nation-state. Also, the emergence of neo-Buddhist community in Maharashtra represents a dynamic and radical departure of Mahars from their Hindu past to bring positive changes in the community. Buddhism as an emancipatory ideology was projected by Ambedkar to radicalize the socio-political discourses to underline his commitment towards the optimisms built by modernity and liberal ideology. The Mahars have successfully demonstrated the accomplishment of Ambedkar's vision of being a progressive community in the modern world.

The present study is divided in three main chapters highlighting (a) the idea of conversion generated as a strategy to developed an alternative socio-political thought in the midst of independence struggle; (b) the significance of conversion in the realm of modern nation-state; and (c) The use of conversion in creating a new society for the future. Attempts were made to derive a political hypothesis concerning the larger debates on Ideology, Citizen and Community with a subaltern perspective.

In the first chapter, an attempt is made to situate the origin of the idea of conversion in the political discourses of the same period. W.N. Kuber in his observation on Ambedkar's conversion noted it as 'his reactionary step' and as a

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[5] See Eleanor Zelliot,, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, 2001, pp. 218-221
[6] See Neera Burra, Buddhism, Conversion and Identity: A case Study of Village Mahars in M.N. Srinivas (ed) *Caste its Twentieth Century Avatar*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 152-173

result of 'his wrong approach towards Marxism.'[7] Political scientists often describe modern Buddhist conversion as Ambedkar's last attempt to prove his stature as the sole leader of Dalits under a declining political presence. Such a representation is misleading and diverts the attention from the real context in which Ambedkar sought to develop his idea on conversion. Conversion represents Ambedkar's ideological intervention in the realm of mainstream political domain which under the domination of Gandhi and Marxism had become the reproducer of the interests of the upper caste elite's. Both the ideological formulations were targeted by him. He questioned their practicability in ameliorating the conditions of Dalits. Ambedkar noted that Gandhi's religiosity and Marxian materialism were not effective enough to destroy the 'permanent religious psyche' of Hindu society which was responsible for providing the required superstructure to build the edifice of casteism. By employing Buddhism as an ideology for the emancipation of Dalits, Ambedkar brought out the fallacies of the caste Hindu's political constructions which under the broader framework of nationalism, religion and revolution tried to avert the debate over the dehumanized conditions of Dalits.

Ambedkar attempted to provide Dalits with an ideology that will not only give them a map for their political journey as the new aspirants of rights and dignity in public, but will also generate a comprehensive ideological alternative different from the Brahminical and western models of social change. He had developed a subaltern perspective to reconstitute the then existed narratives on modern state, identity and political philosophy. Buddhism contributed in making such assumption practical in the domain of ideological confrontations.

By taking recourse to conversion, Ambedkar made religion the main arena of conflict rather than banking on the optimism created by the western liberal values. The second chapter discusses the impact of Ambedkar's religious discourse on the modern nation state. This chapter enquires into the reasons behind "his (Ambedkar's) loss of faith in the secular state as a potential ally in the lifting of disabilities under which untouchables had labored for centuries"[8]. For this purpose

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[7]W.N. KUBER, *Ambedkar a critical Study*, PPH, New Delhi, 1991 P. 98
[8]Gauri Vishvanathan, *Outside the Fold*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 236

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we examine the relationship between the state and the Dalit-self.

Ambedkar observed that Dalits in Hinduism are not entitled to the basic human rights essential for a dignified presence in the public because of the degraded value of caste permanently attached to them. The Hindu social institutions based on caste hierarchy are antagonistic to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Under the impression that the formation of modern nation state in India would progressively destroy the primordial, conservative outlook of the society, the nationalist elites employed liberal western values in the making of Indian constitution. Ambedkar as the chief architect of constitution endorsed the need for a 'welfare state' as the central agency to promote and create social conscience among masses. However, Ambedkar was well aware of the fact that the Brahminical culture is the main motivating force in the Hindu society. The social customs, orthodox caste duties, transcendental values, superstitions and belief in supernatural powers as the representatives of conservatism became the impediments in the progressive run of the modern nation state. For Ambedkar it became imperative to liberate the Dalit masses from the clutches of such a complex paradigm of false religiosity so that they can explore and enjoy the benefits of the new democratic political system. He proposed a moral-ethical and philosophical doctrine which also supplements the scientific and progressive temperament of modern nation state.

We would like to argue that the decision to convert to Buddhism which finally materialized in 1956 should be viewed in the larger debate over the optimism created by the development of modern state. Ambedkar wished a greater and dignified representation of Dalits in the process of nation building which he argued was impossible under the domination of Hindu caste system. Buddhism was employed as the psychological device for the Dalits to relate themselves to a bright and golden past and superior culture to enable them to assert themselves as dignified moral agents, so that they could enter into a contract in public life with a rediscovered self and not as untouchables.

The final chapter deals with the making of neo-Buddhist community in

Maharashtra. After situating conversion to Buddhism in relation to the modern Indian state, this chapter would be an attempt to locate the impact of conversion as a movement in changing the fabric of a community that has remained untouchable for centuries. The Mahar community of Maharashtra will be an obvious site of examination here because of its relationship with the modern Buddhist movement in India.

The Sociological-Anthropological surveys and case studies employed to examine the impact of conversion have often worked under a narrow paradigm of revealing the 'reality' or to see the 'change' conversion has brought in the life of untouchables. The researchers under an idealist hypothesis submit themselves to do a survey with a comparative approach and find a partial change, especially in the cultural and ritual domain of the converted community. Conversion as a movement is seen in our study as a builder of a common discourse over the wider issues of culture, community and the nature of religion required for the oppressed. It provides an alternative set of thoughts within the community to transform it to a meaningful, autonomous and progressive representation of their consciousness in the larger arena of civil society. Max Weber has argued that religion is an important component in providing meaning and purpose to the actions of a community. In *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* he located the development of Western industrial capitalism as the outcome of growing Protestantism in Europe. Taking the same approach, Buddhist conversion can be seen as the necessary element in bringing about the visible change among the Mahars. Ambedkar took refuge in Buddhism because he had envisaged a development of a moral community different from the Hindu order. The Mahars following the footsteps of their leader have discarded their impure identity, occupations and cultural symbols and have endorsed their commitment to a broader emancipatory movement of Dalits. With conversion to Buddhism they became the subject of a new paradigm to discover their own identity, culture and communitarian ethos.

Under a subaltern methodological perspective the following study on Ambedkar's Buddhist conversion is seen as a part of a broader protest movement of

Dalits. The subaltern literature proposes a critical opposition to the notions of religion, culture and mainstream ideological streams of caste Hindu elites by bringing up the voices of the marginalized people. Applying the same critical perspective, the phenomenon of Buddhist conversion is understood here as a builder of alternative socio-political and cultural arguments against the notions propagated by the mainstream social scientists. The classical ideological notions of Gandhi and the then prevailing Marxists strand were judged by a perspective derived through Ambedkar's writings on religion. To justify it as a political project, for the reconstruction of Indian society and nation, it is imperative to apply universal, collectivist and uniform symbols available in the subaltern literature. The analysis of conversion movement is undertaken to legitimize its contribution in creating a valid discourse over the issues of religion, nation-state and the positioning of a minority community. Another characteristic of subaltern movement is its emphasis on the construction of a new world order from bottom up. This characteristic is employed to examine the trajectory of a neo-Buddhist community. The collective discourses within the community for a possible change represent an ongoing process of conversion movement towards its positive end. To establish this argument, we have located the change among Mahars in a broader positive outlook, neglecting the internal differences existing within the converted community. Dalit literature in particular has justified the conversion movement by demonstrating the radical change it brought about in the overall communitarian outlook of ex-Mahars related to culture, rituals and spirituality.

In the current political situation when the country is facing the growing threats from communalism and casteism to the values of democracy and secularism, Ambedkar's ideas on religion gain new significance. Buddhism, as imagined by Ambedkar is not a Dalit religion but a universal ethics combined with a path of individual purification and liberation. As a social movement it garners the potentials to establish social democracy and could provide real meaning to the political independence of nation. Ours is an attempt to present a subaltern perspective contextualizing Ambedkar's Buddhist conversion in the discourse of political-sociology.

CHAPTER I

Conversion as Political Project - The Making of an Alternative Ideology

Dalit identity in the contemporary period is not in any account a universal or homogeneous identity. Social science especially Sociology while respecting the mosaic of these varied identities starting from 'untouchables' to modern 'Dalits' has attempted to provide a critical assessment about its origin mainly in relation to the caste system in India. Various religious, social and political movements in the past 150 years have provided an impetus to Dalit masses to assert their identity against various outrageous forms of caste oppression and social prejudices. The assertion of Dalit identity in public realm is seen as democratic, progressive and in many accounts revolutionary by political scientists. The Social change brought about by Dalit activism in modern times is phenomenal but still, a long battle has to be waged against the deep-rooted oppressive caste social system.

This historical battle against caste discrimination resulted into constructing broader identities like *Harijan* and 'Proletariat' along with regional identities like *Adi-dravida* or *Namasudra* in different parts of the country. In this regard, Ambedkar's advent in the socio-political milieu of India changed the discourse on untouchability. Ambedkar saw the roots of untouchability in Hindu religious texts, which govern the psyche of the whole society. At the very early stage of social reform movement he had endorsed to the fact that the emancipation of untouchables could be achieve by rejecting Hinduism.[9] His followed bitter engagements within the

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[9] As early as in 1927, Ambedkar in *Bahiskrit Bharat* (Nov. 4) advocated the mode of conversion as a remedy for the untouchables.

nationalist discourse over the issues pertaining to the rights of depressed classes act as a medium which made Ambedkar convinced to employ conversion to some other religion as the final solution for the liberation of Dalits. His conversion to Buddhism was one of the historical events, which resulted into constructing a new identity and political philosophy for the subaltern masses.

In the mainstream discourse over Ambedkar's conversion and its effects on untouchable masses, there is ample amount of academic and political work. Prominent among them is the work done by Eleanor Zelliot and Gail Omvedt. Eleanor Zelliot argues that the conversion to Buddhism brought enormous change in the 'psyche' of the untouchables.[10] For her, Buddhism was chosen as the religion of conversion because it offered a way out of the psychological imprisonment of the Hindu caste system. She also points out that the qualities of rationality, equality, and intellectual creativity in Buddhist tradition also influenced Ambedkar to choose Buddhism over other religions.[11] Gail Omvedt, too, affirms that though Ambedkar was trained mainly as an economist at Columbia University, he had developed a sociological theory of religion. Omvedt argues that Ambedkar should be seen in the context of other Sociologists of religion such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Peter Berger to be able to understand his position on the 'instrumentality of religion'.[12] Focusing on Ambedkar's posthumously published article "Philosophy of Hinduism", she analyses what one can call as the core of Ambedkar's sociology of religion. Noted social activist and thinker Yashwant Sumant also endorsed this argument. He stresses the fact that Ambedkar should also be seen within the context of twentieth century Maharashtra. Ambedkar shared the liberal and rationalist insights of M.G. Shinde and Jyotirao Phule but he also questioned their theistic and deistic base in dissociating morality from religion.[13]

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[10]Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, p. 218
[11]ibid, pp. 218-219
[12]Gail Omvedt, Confronting Brahmanic Hinduism and Indian Society, in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (eds) *Reconstructing the World. B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 50-51.
[13]Yashwant Sumant, Situating Religion in Ambedkar's Political Discourse, in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (eds) *Reconstructing the World. B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 64-68.

This sociological perspective of Ambedkar's conversion upheld Buddhism to be a social philosophy based on morality and science, and not a religion at all. This perspective also locates the whole phenomenon of Buddhist conversion as a provided social method or a code of conducts, based on morality, self sacrifice and scientific ritualism to the followers. It also suggests that the social ethics provided by Buddhism for the construction of a new society is universal. Sumant also argues that Ambedkar did not mean to propose a communal religion for the untouchables or Dalits (alone). It is not justified to see him seeking an exclusivist subaltern Dalit religious identity. He did not want to create another specifically Dalit religion which is oriented as an antipode to the hegemonic mainstream. He tried to overcome existing social relations of communalism and communitarian identities and wanted to reinvent them on a new basis. He transgressed discourses of domination and resistance that attributed in creating ontological differences between different groups of people.

In the following study we do not wish to focus on the analysis propounded by mainstream social scientists regarding conversion, the focus would rather be upon the political-sociology of Ambedkar's conversion. We wish to argue that from the very beginning of Ambedkar's political activism, the way he perceived Dalit identity, differed from the other dominated ideological and social perspectives in place. In spite of its wide ideological and historical significance, conversion should be looked in the contextual framework of political activism of the period. The deliberate act of conversion was not just for providing a set of moral and ethical principles to untouchables for their "psychological" aspirations, but was a political-rational instrument utilized by Ambedkar to promote an identity and an ideology of the depressed classes against the dominant political ideologies upheld by the upper caste elite.

Ambedkar actively worked for the deconstruction of conservative and traditional identities linked with depressed classes. The constitutional maneuvering to provide the untouchables the constitutional identity of 'scheduled castes' is noted as the outcome of his endless political efforts. In his political battles he addressed the

limitations of the Congress and Socialists in fighting the problem of caste. Making social reforms primary to his agenda, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was integral to the construction of an alternative ideology of emancipation in modern India. Attempts are made to locate conversion as a political project deliberately chosen by Ambedkar in opposition to the different political projects of the same period. The Gandhian Congress, the Socialists/Marxists and Hindutva were the three dominant ideological formations which had the potential to incorporate the depressed classes within their framework. Ambedkar's conversion is seen here as an alternative to such ideological insinuations.

Dominant Ideologies and the Subaltern Response

Commenting on the ideological dimensions of the Indian National Movement, Prof. Bipan Chandra observes, "The Indian National Movement based itself on a clear-cut anti-colonial ideology and the vision of a civil libertarian, democratic, secular and socially radical society"[14]. He refers to Gandhi's leadership and the influence of International Communism that led the Indian National Congress to pursue of a distinct path to win the struggle for Independence characterized by a popular people's movement. In his overall study of India's independence struggle, he demonstrates the involvement of various social forces in that struggle in first half of twentieth century that expressed the contradiction between colonialism and the interest of Indian people. Even on the issue of social transformation he credits only Gandhi's activism in "the removal of distinction and discrimination between physical and mental labor" and in opposing "caste inequality and oppression"[15]. Thus the nationalist movement represents the 'unified' outcry of the whole nation including minorities and other oppressed groups against the yoke of British domination.

Interpreting Marxian views on ideology, Bryan Turner has pointed out:

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[14] Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1999, p. 528
[15] Ibid. p. 527

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Each mode of production will give rise to at least two significantly separate ideologies corresponding to the class position of sub-ordinate and super-ordinate classes.[16]

Bipan Chandra's approach to study the national movement eminently meets such an analysis. He remarks that the Congress and the Left-Wing were the two ideological groups, equally representing the interests of the 'sub-ordinate' classes against the domination of the 'super-ordinate' British Empire. The ideology of Nationalism was a great unifying force representing the hope of the entire mass of people and their willingness to march towards a common future. Chandra, in this journey fails to recognize the 'other' socio-political entities that emerged in the same period.

Any narrative of the national movement will be a half told story if many 'non-nationalist', and 'local', ideological formation of the period are not taken into consideration. For the purpose of our study assumption of these 'other' became imperative as they include the social and cultural voice of depressed classes against 'Colonial Brahmanism'.[17] Secondly, they highlight the internal dynamics of Indian society and destroy the 'deceptive myth' of Indian Nationalism created by historians like Bipan Chandra and others. Finally, it provides an alternative philosophical paradigm to imagine a nation based on equality and liberty. Such an understanding needs to foreground on a different perspective of the Indian Nationalist.

The Elite Brahmanic Domination on the Ideology of Indian Nationalism

The first stage of the Nationalist Political awakening in India was infact elitist in nature. It received its impetus from the early socio-religious reform movements of Bengal and Maharashtra when the demand to reform the society came to be voiced faced with the modern western model of organizing social relations. However, with the new political awakening, the *internal problems* were sidelined and fighting the external enemy, the British Colonialism, became the sole agenda of emerging national leadership in India. The newly western educated upper caste elites drew

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[16]Bryan S Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, Heinemann Educational Books, London, p. 78
[17]G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, New Age International (P) Limited, Publishers, New Delhi, 1998, p. 129

their conception of nationalism from the European nations where Feudalism collapsed with the upsurge of the modern bourgeoisie. They dreamed of a unified territorial nation where they would be the successors to the British. The problem they faced in pursuing this option was their own class attachment with feudal economic setup and fighting against these modes of oppression. These elites were far to entangled in feudal relations of dominance and other modes of oppression of which caste relations were very significant. In other words, for them breaking down the feudal structure meant calling their own people their own enemy. In this situation something like, *The Drain Theory*, propagated by Dadabhai Nauroji came handy to them. They carried out a systematic propaganda among the masses through journals and newspapers, declaring "The Drain as the *basic* cause of India's poverty and the fundamental evil of British rule in India"[18] negating any reference to feudal and caste exploitation of agrarian laborers.

Apart from such ideological construction, the second tool that the nationalist elites employed was the cultural front, depicting India's distinctness, superiority and uniqueness in opposition to Western modernity. They imagined a Nationalism based on a homogenous Indian culture, territorial design and accepting a social system based on *varna/caste*. A sharp contrast was drawn between the West and the East, distinguishing them as external and internal respectively. The external realm of politics or the public was open to all but the internal social and cultural milieu was restricted for any kind of intervention by the alien foreigners.[19] Thus, Sanskritic Vedic Texts, traditional societal values, the representation of women, customs, spirituality etc. became the main elements of inspiration to argue against the 'materialist-individualist' West.

> The multiple religio-cultural traditions of the subcontinent were now seen as part of a single coherent religion-Hinduism- which was emerging with all the regular trapping of organized religions such as Islam and Christianity. The intelligentsia, both within and without the political movement, repeatedly felt compelled to define the Hindu person and the

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[18]Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1999, p. 97 (italics added)

[19]Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 76-94

content of Hinduism. Their definition invariably revolved around Vedic Brahmanic ideals, icons and codes of behavior as represented in the Dharma Shastras. The culture of subcontinent was defined and described as Hindu culture and Hindu civilization and in explicitly political context, as Indian culture and civilization.[20]

Hindu Religion was explicitly used to demonstrate the difference between the two civilizations. This articulation was solely Brahmanic and negated the generally accepted belief today that India represents a plural society of many linguistic-religious nationalities, culture-groups, tribes and castes. Brahmanic Culture became the instrument in homogenizing existing local and tribal cultural values and traditions. The Indian culture in the blend of homogenous Hindu religion was transformed India's plurality for the political benefits of upper caste elites to dominate the power structure. The existing social evils within the 'internal' arena such as subjugation of women and caste oppression were personalized by relating it to customs and religiosity. The battle was not only centered over the issue of national independence but also acquired wide range of construction and deconstruction of images portraying uniform religious culture, homogenized Hindu civilization and an unique 'western-eastern' dichotomy. This ideological initiation of Indian nationalism was celebrated and promoted as the aspirations of the whole nation not only by the elite nationalists but also in later period of mass awakening by leaders like Gandhi, Aurobindo and Vivekananda who became the spokesperson of such conservative outlook. Even the Socialists-nationalists did not categorically demonstrate their opposition to such an attempt and remained continued the same as another variety of the same elite articulation.[21]

The political awakening did not remain under the sole custody of elites but the British rule in India opened doors of opportunities to varied communities. Many of these communities have had been the most exploited by the Hindu caste system, and were sensitized to seek escape from such domination. In the emerging modern political structure, they were the first to challenge the concept of homogenized Hindu

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[20]G. Aloysius, *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997, p. 140
[21]ibid. p. 142

religion by voicing their plight. With growing consciousness about their conditions, as organised communities they demonstrated an ideological commitment to challenge the domination of Brahmanic supremacy in all social, political, religious and cultural-fronts. These non-Brahmanic movements in India in the context of Indian Nationalism represent a making of 'subaltern ideology', distinct from and non-compromising with Brahmanic-Hindu hegemony.

The Subaltern Response: Making of Caste/Religion Ideology

As noted above Brahmanism and elite leadership were the two main characteristics of Indian nationalism. It essentialized Imperialism as the prime evil for all the existing problems in India, it created a fear of the 'other' and demonstrated itself as the sole representative of the whole India to combat it. It was obvious to the depressed classes of India that they should resist this camouflaged attack of mythical Hinduism on their culture, religious traditions, languages and other ethnic values. Further with the growing awareness of their backward conditions it became imperative on them to develop an alternative agenda, constructing the idea of society, state and the individual different from both the dominant notions of colonial Imperialism and Brahmanism. Religion and culture became the two main elements in the making of their ideology, as these were the two tools employed for their subjugation and continuous exploitation. In the domain of British rule they characterized themselves as equal and generated a legitimate discourse over civil rights and their status in the modern nation. Relating themselves with the cause of social liberation a vibrant upsurge of non-brahmanic movements could be noticed in all major parts of the country led by stalwarts such as Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra, Mangoo Ram in Punjab, Swami Achchutanand of United Province Shri. Narayan Guru in Kerala and Pundit Ayothee Thass in Tamilnadu. These leaders demonstrated an intellectual capability of the *lower* castes in countering the Brahmanic hegemony and to radicalize the existing thoughts on social and political development.

The subaltern challenge to Brahmanism had roots in the theoretical notion of the 'other' which expressed itself in terms of Aryan conquest and Brahman

exploitation through religion. These movements identified themselves as 'original habitants' or non-Aryans and created an *Adi* notion to assert a status as a people subordinated by later Aryan immigrants to India.[22] It had political implications demonstrating the majority of people subordinated to privileged minority. Kisan Fagoji Bansode who led the *Mahars* of Maharashtra before Ambedkar reiterated the same argument:

> The Aryans -your ancestors- conquered us and gave us unbearable harassment. At that time we were your conquest, you treated us even worse than slaves and subjected us to any torture you wanted. But now we are no longer your subjects, we have no service relationship with you; we are not your slaves or serfs... We have had enough of the harassment and torture of the Hindus.[23]

The Hindu hegemony was challenged by using the same tool of religion but they did it by deconstructing the Brahminical notion of authority, cultural superiority, and Hindu Selfhood. Against this they argued that the values of equality and self respect are primary to any meta-narrative construction of the universal Hindu Self. On this Aloysius remarks,

> Here the struggle for social egalitarianism and abolition of ascriptive privilege did not necessarily imply a wholesale appropriation of the juridico-administrative paraphernalia of bourgeois democracy or of political modernization, yet it embodied the same human aspirations towards equality and equal recognition that can identified in all human collectives.[24]

Hindu religion as an ideology is opposed to the very notion of egalitarianism in every respect. Many of the early mass religious conversion to Christianity and

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[22]Marika Vicziany, and Mendelsohn Oliver, *The Untouchables*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p. 3
[23]Quoted from Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1994, p. 110
[24]G. Aloysius, *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997, p. 148

Islam demonstrated the fallacy of 'a shared bond across Hindus' constructed by the Brahmanic ideology. The reason to embrace any religious tradition could be judged by the ideology that a particular religion is offering to its adherents. Conversion in this respect is an effective way to express human reason in public and one's disbelief in the existing religious order. Conversion in the case of *lower* castes represents the same mode of opposition to Hinduism as well as their search for better social conditions. The religious symbolisms offered by non-Hindu traditions like Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism are based putably on 'the universal-ethical' concept of equality and fraternity for its members. Buddhism in this context, since its rise on the religious firmament of the sub-continent, has been an unfading symbol of the ethical-rational agency as against the bigoted and conservative backward Hindu religion.[25] Thus, Buddhism compliments the struggle of the oppressed castes in their battle against Brahminical, hierarchical traditions and provides a religio-ideological alternative to it.

In the era of modern religious movements during the second decade of twentieth century, Ayothee Thass was among the first to demonstrate the competence of Buddhist religion as an emancipatory ideology for the oppressed masses in Tamilnadu. Buddhism was related to and imagined as a golden past imbedded with an egalitarian social system with a self-content individual as a member of a community.[26] Ayothee Thass did not simply focus on distinct ideology and culture for the subaltern masses, but he equally stressed on the need for 'righteousness' in a religion. Dr. Ambedkar during the middle years of twentieth century revitalized this ideology by converting more than five million Dalits into Buddhism. He developed a rational perspective on Buddhism and crafted a religious and cultural alternative to foreground long term political intervention.[27] It was the final articulation of Ambedkar's social and political activism that tried to subvert Hinduism as the universal basis of Indian Nationalism and secondly, the option of conversion to Islam and Christianity proposed by others.

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[25] G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, New Age International (P) Limited, Publishers, New Delhi, 1998, p. 22

[26] G. Aloysius, *Iyothee Thassar and Emancipatory Buddhism*, Critical Quest, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 16-26

[27] Gauri Vishvanathan, *Outside the Fold*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 212-213

18

Ambedkar and Buddhism: Constructing Alternative Political Ideology

Ambedkar as a political activist confronted the Indian National Congress and other Left parties (Communist and Socialist) on various fronts. Both these organisations were seen as the representatives of upper-caste interests in politics. Ambedkar was also against the broad categorization of Dalits as *Harijans* or 'proletariat', as such representation was seen by him as attempts by the Hindu elites to subjugate them. Thirdly, Ambedkar countered the nationalist elites over the exclusive emphasis on a narrow conceptualization of Imperialism and British rule. For him liberation from the domination of internal colonialism (Brahmanism) was equally important in comparison to the political goals propagated by the Indian National Congress. Ambedkar identified 'caste-conflict' as the core element to understand the exploitative nature of Hindu social order against the exclusive emphasis on the 'economic determinism' of the then prevailing Marxism. Further, he was in opposition to Gandhi and Indian Marxists regarding the path of 'Revolution'. Ambedkar rejected the attempts of Radicals to employ violent means for bringing social change. He was a firm believer in social liberalism and had deep faith in the 'force of religion' to instill a moral basis to society. He rejected the utopian 'trusteeship' argument of Gandhi and brought Buddhism in order to justify his opposition to social reformism.

In the following part it is being argued that Ambedkar shove to construct an alternative ideology against Gandhi and Indian Marxists by bringing back the critical tradition of religious discourse. Buddhism as the logical expression of subaltern masses was derived in a context when the idea of religion gathered extremely fundamental meanings. Conversion to Buddhism is seen as the outcome of his ideological debates in which he was involved throughout his life.

Gandhian Project of Social Reformism and Ambedkar's Revolt

Mahatma Gandhi was the most prominent leader among the caste Hindus who is regarded as the 'great crusader' in the battle for the total eradication of untouchability from the Hindu society. Gandhi and Ambedkar both developed a vision for the society based on equality. But the difference lies in Ambedkar's program where he intended to integrate the untouchables into Indian society, in modern not in traditional ways, and on a level where the position of an individual would be judged on the scales of his deeds and not on birth status. This goal stood in marked contrast to Gandhi's *'Ideal Bhangi'* (*Harijan,* 23 November, 1936) who would be the equal of a Brahmin, hereby voluntarily accepting the *'Chaturvarna'* system. Gandhi was critical to the existing nature of caste system but he was not ready to locate the reasons for untouchability into the *'Chaturvarna'* system which Ambedkar had explicitly demonstrated in his writings. Gandhi defended caste system referring it as the compulsory element of Hindu religion. As early as on December, 1920 he wrote in *Young India*:

> I believe that caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration. (...) But like every other institution it has suffered from excrescences. I consider the four divisions (*Chaturvarna*) alone to be fundamental, natural and essential.

Ambedkar's ideal for the depressed classes was to raise their educational standards so that they could know their own degraded conditions. He emphasized on generating 'social conscience' among the untouchables to bestow the fighting spirit. The use of political power was seen as a correct path to end the perpetual slavery sanctioned by Hindu social system. Against Gandhi's attributes to caste system, he saw untouchability as the product of social sanctions endorsed by Hindu religious texts. Ambedkar's ideal society was based on three values: liberty, equality and fraternity.[28] He argued that Hinduism disregard these values in its social system.

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[28] AMBEDKAR, B.R., *Annihilation of Caste* in Vasant Moon (compiler) Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979, p. 87

Between these two contrasting ideals of the society, Ambedkar regarded equality not only as equal status for the *Varnas* in social milieu but also equal political and economic opportunities for all in pursuing their individual goals.

Ambedkar's decision on religious conversion was not sporadic or sudden, and should be seen in the context in which he decided to act. Ambedkar obtained his PhD from Columbia University and returned to Bombay in 1923 to begin his organizational work among untouchables, and soon came in close association with caste Hindus who encouraged his leadership. The initial stage of Ambedkar's activism was reformist in nature and his programs were influenced by ideals shared by Gandhi as well in certain respects. Although initially Ambedkar stated that for untouchables "the most important event in the country today is Satyagraha at Vaikam",[29] he pointed out that after a whole year of protest there had been no result. He next spoke of Gandhi:

> He (Gandhi) does not insist on the removal of untouchability as much as he insists on the propagation of Khaddar [home spun cloth] or Hindu-Muslim unity. If he had he could have made the removal of untouchability a precondition for voting in the party.[30]
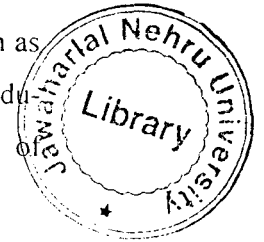
This shows the growing reservations towards Gandhi on the social reformist front. Ambedkar did not however completely reject Gandhian strategy of social reformism. In fact, on religious and social issues he resorted to Gandhian way of *Satyagraha,* mass action without violence.

The event that catapulted Ambedkar to the front rank of Dalit leadership was the *Mahad* Satyagraha Campaign in 1927. This was the first of public protest by Ambedkar. The Satyagraha consisted simply of the assertion of the right of Dalits to drink water from *Chowdar,* an open public tank in the local town of *Mahad* in

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[29]The Vaikam Satyagraha of 1924-25 in Tarvancore State offered Gandhi his first opportunity to act publicly on behalf of untouchables for the entry to the Temple at Vaikam.

[30]Quoted in Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004, p. 63

Konkan, It was a non-violent protest for the basic rights of untouchables. Another very unique event that took place during the *Mahad* Satyagraha was the burning of *Manusmriti*[31], the sacred law book of the Brahminical tradition. Justifying his action of burning the *Manusmriti*, Ambedkar said in the 3rd February, 1928 issue of his *Bahishkrit Bharat*, that his reading of the *Manusmriti* had convinced him that it was abusive and insulting in its treatment of the *Shudras* and it does not even remotely support the idea of social equality. To burn a thing was to register a protest against the idea it represented. In both these activities, Ambedkar was supported by caste Hindu friends and supporters.

Ambedkar organised the largest and the longest Satyagraha on 2nd March, 1930 at *Nasik* for ensuring entry of the Dalits in the *Kala Ram* Temple: around 15,000 *Mahars* and *Chambhars* had assembled at *Nasik*. But the temple was closed for one year to keep them away. The *Parvati* Satyagraha at Poona met the same fate. Thus Ambedkar's effort of social reform did not succeed in changing the Hindu social order which Gandhi argued was possible by moral persuasion. He later clarified the motives behind the Satyagraha. He said:

> It is not that you can solve al your problems by Satyagraha. This is only a request to the upper class Hindu mind. This Satyagraha movement is going to prove whether Hindu mind treats human beings as human beings. This Satyagraha is to change the heart of Hindus. This movement will decide whether Hindu mind regards humanity in the new age.[32]

During this phase of reformism, Ambedkar favoured social mobilization of masses over direct political pursuits. The reason he outlined was:

> I started the temple entry Satyagraha only because I felt that was the best way of energizing the depressed classes and making them conscious of

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[31] The ancient law book of Hindus which gives legal recognition to the institution of four *Varnas* and sanctified differential treatment of low castes.

[32] Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar's life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1981, p. 10

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their position ...[33]

But soon he realized the futility of such efforts because these efforts of Sanskritization failed to accord Dalits a higher status in the caste hierarchy. Ambedkar showed his first inclination for conversion to another religion in the same period of Mahad Satyagraha.[34] Gandhi, on the other hand, stood committed in support of social reforms as he viewed untouchability as the internal problem of the Hindus insisting that it was possible for Hinduism to do away with the evil of untouchability. He appealed to the upper caste Hindus that they should come forward to end untouchability and continue with the process of social reform.

The failure of social reform movement however provided an impetus to think afresh on an ideology of Dalit emancipation different from the agenda of caste Hindu social and political reforms. Gathering the energetic momentum of social reform Ambedkar entered the second phase of his leadership, which sought political power for depressed classes. Ambedkar emphasized on political power as he noticed that

Ambedkar wrote:

When the untouchables lost all hope for their salvation through social reform, they were forced to seek political means for protecting themselves.[35]

Reform movement had failed to bring about any improvement in social status of Dalits in a substantial measure; it was thought that, Hindu social order should be attacked from more secular grounds like economic betterment, educational and political representation of the downtrodden in the body politics. He now saw the problems of Untouchables as essentially political. He viewed politics as a civilizing

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[33]Letter from B.R. Ambedkar to B.K. Gaikwad March 3, 1934, in possession of B.K. Gaikwad, quoted in Gary Tartakov, *B.R. Ambedkar and the Navayana Diksha* in Sathianathan Clarke, and Rowena Robinson, (Eds) *Religious Conversion in India,* Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 202

[34]Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability,* Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004, p. 119

[35]B.R. Ambedkar, "Who were the Shudhras?" in Vasant Moon (compiler) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches,* Bombay, Vol. 7, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979, p. 190

enterprise, which provided opportunities for the development of the potential of individual. Later the political battle of Ambedkar, for the rights of Untouchables brought him to the centre stage of National politics where he found himself in direct confrontation with Gandhi and the Congress over different socio-political problems.

During his social reform movement Ambedkar had already developed a critical approach against Hinduism. His failure to change the Hindu order from within brought him to the political front for the struggle of rights of his people. But soon he found that Brahminical ethics were prevalent and working as a dominant force in managing political activism, especially of the Congress party. Mahatma Gandhi represented this orthodox group of Hindu conservatism in the Congress Party par excellence.

Gandhi always located the solution of untouchability within the premise of the Hindu society and considered the political aspiration of Untouchables as separatist and dangerous to the Hindu religion. This disposition of Gandhi was reflected more glaringly during his confrontations with Ambedkar over the issue of separate electorate for Untouchables. During the Second Round Table Conference on December, 1931 Ambedkar advanced alternative documents for possible constitutional reforms in India, in which the issue of separate electorates for Untouchables (As it was ensured for other minority groups like Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians etc.) was vehemently highlighted. The British acknowledged Ambedkar's alternative and in 1932 a separate electorate to Untouchables was granted. Gandhi resorted to a fast unto death against the award as he had threatened in the Round Table Conference. Ambedkar under ever increasing tension signed the 'Poona Pact' endorsing joint electorate with reservation to save the life of Gandhi. Ambedkar struck a hard bargain substituting a separate electorate with separate primary elections along with a large increase in the number of seats reserved for the Untouchables (from the 78 given in the communal award to 148 seats). The Poona Pact is sometimes seen as the defeat of Ambedkar's leadership to the shrewd and cowardly political stunt of Gandhi[36] but it also witnessed the rise of Ambedkar as the

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[36]K.S. Raju, *Comparative Study of leadership: Gandhi and Ambedkar*, Segment Books, New Delhi, 1991,

representative leader of the Untouchable castes in India against Gandhi who represented the concerns of the Caste Hindus.

The post-Poona Pact period saw a rapid rise of the social and political activism of the Congress under the leadership of Gandhi to eradicate untouchability. Gandhi started his nine month long tour to show his commitment to fight against caste oppression. On 30th September, 1932 he formed 'All India Anti-Untouchability League' in which, initially, Ambedkar was also a member. The purpose of the society was to use peaceful persuasion to secure access for the depressed classes to all-public wells, roads, schools, temples and cremation grounds. This intense period of activism failed to win the support of Ambedkar as it left the initiatives on the abolition of untouchability in the hands of caste Hindus. He had made up his mind to counter the religious positivism of Gandhi through a radical stance. In 1935, Ambedkar announced at Yeola, a town of Maharashtra, near the site of the earlier struggle for temple entry at Nasik, that he was born a Hindu but he would not die a Hindu.[37] In the following year, the Mahars in their Conference endorsed the resolution to dissociate themselves from Hinduism and to embrace some other religion. To Gandhi and to many other social reformers this decision was an unexpected and 'unfortunate event'.

The political context of this announcement should be noted. Ambedkar from 1930 onwards confronted Gandhi on three major fronts, firstly, on the issue of leadership where Gandhi sought an acceptance of his national leadership including over the untouchables, secondly, over the issue of untouchables' position in Hinduism and finally over the pertinent issue of the nature of Hindu religion. Ambedkar argued that Untouchables should have a minority status and should be kept aloof from the domination of the caste Hindus. Gandhi on the other hand wanted to locate the Untouchables within Hinduism and argued that it is the task of the caste Hindus to eradicate untouchability and not of the untouchables. Gandhi sought to change the heart of the caste Hindus by moral pressure within the

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pp.162-163.
[37] W.N. Kuber, *Ambedkar a critical Study*, PPH, New Delhi, 1991, p. 84.

framework of Hindu religion. He was convinced that Hindu religion is flexible enough for social reforms to build a harmonious future. Ambedkar's announcement of conversion foremost rejected Gandhi's created optimism about social reforms, secondly his leadership and finally his *Harijan* model for the emancipation of Dalits. He proposed a new position for untouchables outside the Hindu caste folds.

The final call to convert was postponed for 20 years because of Ambedkar's intense political and administrative activity during the following years. He also faced numerous political attacks from the Hindu Nationalist lobby, which rattled behind Gandhi against Ambedkar's decision of religious conversion.[38] Further Ambedkar also worked intensely to prove that the Untouchables are separate from the Hindus. He wrote three volumes[39] in which he elaborated the need of separate status for the untouchables. In 1945, he published '*What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables*', which was seen as an attempt to make a strong case to justify the demand of Separate Electorates for untouchables. Numerous incidents showing the isolation and maltreatment of untouchables are presented in this book to support the necessity of separation from Hindu religion. The '*Varnashrama dharma*' scheme of Gandhi is described as unnatural ordering of the society, impracticable and inhuman. The proposed religious ideals or principles of Gandhi are seen as a 'sinister' plan to keep untouchables under their traditional hierarchy based Caste system. Secondly, in '*The Untouchables*' he argued that untouchability was the product of the religious conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism. Buddhism was presented as the ancestral religion of untouchables in India.

Ambedkar made his choice to embrace Buddhism to expose the hollowness of Gandhi's religiosity which was one of the major ideological inputs of the Nationalist movement in contemporary India. Ambedkar visualized Buddhism as an ideology of equality, liberty and fraternity based on truth and rationality. No other religion is based on rationality. By proposing Buddhist principles, he also countered the Gandhian ideals of the Hindu religion based on *Varnashrma dharma* and trusteeship.

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[38] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 128-131

[39] The Third Book in this series is '*Who were the Shudhras*'.

Gandhi's religiosity was one of his major weapons to silence his critics. Ambedkar countered the Gandhian religiosity by posing an alternative religion, through which the new identity of the untouchables will be recognised. The making of the religious identity of Untouchables would not only remove them from the clutches of Brahminical values but also would provide an alternative platform based on modern ethics of equality, liberty and fraternity against the hegemonic character of conservative Gandhian ideology. For Ambedkar conversion was not a just a political 'gimmick' to manifest his opposition to Gandhi by using communal character of religion, but was a 'right' emancipatory project for the Dalits to make them aware about the social, religious and political limitations they faced in their life.

Ambedkar, Marxism and Buddhism: Making of Liberation Theology.

From 1920, along with Gandhi's advent in Indian independence struggle, there was a parallel rise of strong working class movement under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (CPI). The Socialist Revolution in Russia under the leadership of Lenin provided a new framework of struggle to the working classes. Lenin adopted the philosophical doctrine of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, which provided a scientific explanation, of the growth of communism and destruction of capitalism. He was the stalwart leader of world communist movement who had elaborated the concept of imperialism and the actual strategy and tactics of the labour movement.[40] The Russian example had a great impact on Indian freedom struggle and in a short period of time Marxism and Socialism became the influential ideologies among the working class people in India. So much so that the Congress Party had two separate ideological fronts within: Gandhian and Socialist. The Communist Party in India tried to work in alliance with Congress for national independence but many times it departed from the ongoing struggle under the influence of political developments in Russia and international Communism. Despite mobilizing workers and peasants in India the Communists were criticized for their unconditional support to International Communism especially to Soviet Russia.

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[40] Aijaz Ahmad, "The Communist Manifesto in its Own Times and in Ours", in Prakash Karat (Ed.) *A World to Win*, Left Word Books, New Delhi, 1999, p.19

Further the leadership of the working class movement in India did not emerge from the proletarian masses but came from western educated upper caste youths. This again was a factor for criticism. Ambedkar was aware of the dynamics of political development among the masses and expressed his critical appreciation towards the philosophy of Marx in his various writings. He aligned himself with the textile mill workers movement in Mumbai in 1928. Again in 1938 against "The Workers' Civil Liberties Suspension Act", Ambedkar organized a protest with other 60 trade union organizations,[41] to which the Congress refused to support but the Communists overwhelmingly supported it.

Ambedkar's approach to social transformations was based on his firm opposition to economic, social and political inequalities. Under such a guideline, he was supportive of Marxian Philosophy, but he also categorically pointed out that there are differences between European class based type of a society and an Indian caste based society. He countered the Socialist notion of a utopian 'Egalitarian society'. He argued that economic status of an individual is not the sole criteria for establishing power, but the status in society and religion are two other important elements which define the power structure in society,[42] especially in a country like India. He countered the Socialists by arguing:

> How can you have economic reforms without first bringing about a reform in social order? The Indian social structure is driven by caste hierarchies. Unless and until you categorically worked for the eradication of the exploitative nature of caste discrimination the journey for revolution will be fruitless. He cautioned the Socialists that the caste is like a monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reforms, unless you kill the monster.[43]

Ambedkar gave prime importance to caste based social diversity to fight against the Brahminical order. He saw Indian caste-based economic structure as markedly

[41]Thomas Mathew, *Ambedkar Reform or Revolution*, Segment books, New Delhi, 1991.

[42]B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* in Vasant Moon (compiler) Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979.

[43]Ibid, p. 46

different from the capitalist economic structure. Though there are free laborers (expropriated from land ownership, since the Vedic age) and though Indian ruling classes roll in divine guarantee of upmanship they did not urge to transform their property into capital to earn more value. Indian economic structure therefore remained theocratic or divine in absence of a desired will to transform labour value into capital.[44] The entire economic hierarchy attributed to God. The source of the caste system is God, it is spiritual and religious. This is a pre-feudal type of mode of production in itself; it had a particular structure, 'a theocracy through kings or monarchs'.[45]

Ambedkar's vision of the new society and culture was basically a casteless and classless society. He was firm in his belief that a total transformation of existing social order is needed and for it a revolution against social hierarchies is necessary. Ambedkar provided a religious notion to economic and social problems arising out of class exploitation and resolved that the Buddhist doctrine of morality is the correct path to attain social change. Further he asserts that the solution achieved through Buddha Dhamma is more long lasting than the revolutionary struggle attained by the exploited classes through violent means which was his conception of Marxist mode of class struggle. Demarcating the salient features of the Buddhist religion, Ambedkar listed the following factors[46], which seem to be very important for the present purpose.

- Religion is necessary for a free society.

- Religion must relate to facts of man's life and not to theories and speculations about God or Soul or Heaven or Earth.

- It is wrong to make God the centre of religion. Man and morality must be the centre of religion.

- The function of religion is to construct the world and to make it happy and not to explain its origin or its end.

[44]Bharat Patankar, "The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period", *Economic and Political Weekly (Annual Number)*, Vol. XIV, Nos. 7 and 8
[45]B.R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste" in Vasant Moon (compiler) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1*, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979.
[46]Sangeetha R. Rao, *Ambedkar and Marx*, Bluemoon Books, New Delhi, 1996, pp.9-10

- That the unhappiness in the world is due to conflicts of interest and only way to remove it is to follow the *Ashtanga Marga.*
- The private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another.
- Nothing is infallible nothing is binding forever. Everything is subject to inquiry and examination.
- Nothing is permanent or *Sanatan.* Everything is subject to change. Being is always becoming.

This understanding of Buddhist religion was based on rationality, morality and a modernist outlook. He pointed out that one can construct a free society based on liberty, equality and fraternity through Buddha's teachings.

Writing on the Marxist interpretation of history and the movement of History, Ambedkar listed the following important features:

- That the purpose of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to explain the origin of the universe.
- That the forces, which shape the course of history, are primarily economic.
- That society is divided into classes: owners and workers.
- That there is always a class conflict going on between two classes.
- That the workers are exploited by the owners who misappropriate the surplus value, which is the result of the workers' labour.
- That this exploitation can be put to an end by nationalization of instrument of production i.e. abolition of private property.
- That this exploitation is leading to greater and greater impoverishment of the working class.
- That this growing impoverishment of the workers is resulting in a spirit among the workers and the conversion of the class conflict into class struggle.
- That if the workers outnumber the owners, the workers are bound to capture the state and establish their rule, which he called the dictatorship of the proletariat.
- These factors are irresistible and therefore Socialism is inevitable.

There are major similarities between Buddha's teachings and Marxism, which

Ambedkar highlighted and appreciated. While expressing his views on Marxism, he interpreted Buddha's word *dukha as* poverty and hence he says that there is no difference between the foundations of their theories. The difference lies in the path of social revolution, which Ambedkar envisaged through the path of moral teachings of the Buddha.[47]

The motivating force of struggle according to Marx is economic complexities, which determine the course of history for a proletarian revolution. It withdraws possibilities for other 'identities' to lead the struggle.[48] Ambedkar argued that the exploitative nature of the caste system is sanctioned by Brahminical texts and *Chaturvana* which are rigid and unchangeable. In such condition he asks the Marxists how a proletarian revolution is going to emancipate the downtrodden castes, which are under deplorable condition because of social and religious sanctions. Ambedkar believed that a social struggle to restore self respect for every member of community is vital and mandatory to achieve the ideals of the casteless-classless society in India.

> Men will join any revolution for the equalization of property unless they
> know that after the revolution is achieved they will be treated as equally
> and there will be no creed and discrimination of caste and creed.[49]

He concluded by saying that the means adopted by the Buddha were to convert a man by changing his moral disposition to follow the path voluntarily. Whereas the means adopted by Communism are equally short, clear, and swift. They are: I) Violence against the capitalist class and II) dictatorship of the proletariat. On the Buddhist side he lists the *Panchashila*, and the *Noble Path* of *Eight Folds*. To the question as to whose means are more efficient, Ambedkar says:

[47]B.R. Ambedkar, "Buddha or Karl Marx", in Vasant Moon (compiler) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1*, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra), 1979
[48]Frederick Engels, "Principles of Communism", *Selected Works Vol. 1*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 81
[49]B.R Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste", in Vasant Moon (compiler) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1*, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979, p. 447

One has to choose between government by force and government by moral disposition[50]

It is clear from the above discussion that Ambedkar undoubtedly had a great appreciation for a Communist society, but he expresses his antipathy towards dictatorship and the Communist means which resorts to violence. He believes that Buddhism creates the society aimed at by the Communist i.e. a society based on equality, but without dictatorship or force.

Ambedkar's criticism against Marxism was based on theoretical as well as practical grounds. He categorically pointed out the impracticability of pursuing Communism in the caste based Hindu society. By building a comprehensive intellectual scholarship on Buddhism he propagated a variant of modern social ethics that prioritized rationality in community living. Therefore, he renounced the Marxist political philosophy based on sheer materialism. For him "Man must grow materially as well as spiritually" was the core philosophical attribute to bring change in human relations.[51] Hatred does not cease by hatred; by love alone does it cease.' Such is the Buddha's advice to those preach the doctrine of violence and revulsion.[52] Ambedkar build his political philosophy under the guidelines of Buddha's moral teachings. His understanding of modern society rested on three guiding principles: Liberty, equality and fraternity. He elaborated:

> The French revolution was welcomed because of this slogan. It failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasized that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can co- exist only if one follows the way of Buddha. Communism can

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[50]B.R. Ambedkar, "Buddha or Karl Marx", in Vasant Moon (compiler) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3*, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979, p. 453

[51]Ibid. p. 462

[52]K.S. Dhammananda, *What Buddhists Believe*, The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Taiwan, 1993, p. 285

give one but not all.[53]

Ambedkar relocates Buddhism in the trajectory of Marxism and vice versa. His deep religious and spiritual commitment, which considered religion as moral principle and not as opium, helped him to choose Buddhism as an alternative to Marxist materialist path of communist revolution.

Ambedkar was writing about Marxism and Buddhism in post independence period. This was also the period when he was working as the chairman of the Constituent Assembly. He recognized the critical side of state in social welfare. The ideas and ideals of John Dewey, Edwin R.A.Seligman, the Fabians and the British Idealists had a deep impact on Ambedkar.[54] He strongly defended the idea of an ameliorative and developmental role of the state i.e. an interventionist approach to the state. He rejected the utopian conceptualization of 'wither away state' propagated by the contemporary radical Marxists and locate the need of state as vital agency for development. His idea of state ownership was limited to "agricultural land" within a democratic "collectivized method of cultivation" and a form of state socialism in the field of industry, including, the nationalization of insurance companies. He did not want the suppression of private property but argued for liberative constitutional provisions for every citizen.[55]

Thus, Ambedkar viewed the state as an instrument for transforming the civil society into a modern liberal and democratic sphere. At the same time, he emphasized the need for constitutional laws which will not only protect various minority groups against the domination of a majority but also uphold reason and morality in the public domain. Religion, according to him, could play a major role in lightening the task of law.

Marxists viewed the social conflict in modern society as a rivalry between two antagonistic camps: capitalists and proletarians. The proletariat as a class all the

[53]Ibid, p. 462
[54]R.K. Kshir Sagar, *Dalit Movement and its Leaders in India*, N.D. Publication, New Delhi, 1994, p. 126
[55]G. Nancharaih, "Dr. Ambedkar's Social and Economic Thought" in *Ambedkar and Social Justice, Vol. II*, Published by the Director, Pub. Division, MIB, Government of India, New Delhi, 1992, p. 42

working people, peasants and toiling masses. In this sense the former is a universal class. In India, this kind of formulation of struggling masses never influenced Ambedkar. He categorically pointed out the hegemonic cultural domination of caste Hindus which not only forces the untouchables to live out of the social fold of society, but also kept them away from making any kind of alliance against such hegemony. He saw the battle of the Indian proletariat (untouchables) as firstly against the caste system and later against dominant economic relations. Ambedkar thus, from the very beginning sought the exit of untouchables out of the Hindu fold and to achieve self respect. The conversion to Buddhism not only provided ethical dimension to the movement of untouchables but it also constructed a spiritual trajectory, different from Marxist perspective of social change.

Contextualizing the Impact of Ambedkar's Conversion

There are three aspects of conversion: Social, Religious and Political. Ambedkar was firm in his resolve to change his religion from 1930 onwards. In 1935, he declared that though he was born a Hindu he would not die as one. This was the period when Ambedkar had already started his second phase of leadership in the national political scenario. The main reason underlying his declaration at that time was less political and more social. His intervention in the social domain as a reformer through the Gandhian way of protest did not create any significant movement among the untouchables nor was it helpful in "changing the hearts" of caste Hindus to fight against untouchability. Ambedkar understood this failure in social domain as the outcome of intrinsically conservative social values, which govern the Hindu public domain. For him the problem of untouchability was a matter of class struggle. It was a struggle between the caste Hindus and the Untouchables. He altered his belief from those of social reformism towards those of social transformation because he saw untouchability in Hindu society as a "Permanent Phenomenon" and as "Eternal".[56] There was no possibility of reforms within Hindu religion and emancipation of his people was possible only outside its religious fold.

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[56]B.R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste", in Vasant Moon (compiler) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1*, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979, p. 55

Ambedkar envisaged a path of struggle to emancipate the Untouchables by making 'Mental Strength' an instrument to fight against religious audacity. He located this strength in Buddhism. Thus the failed social domain and Ambedkar's firm resolve to liberate untouchables from the tyranny of caste system for a life of self respect led him to choose the path of conversion.

The conversion movement should be seen as a part of the larger Ambedkarian struggle aimed at regaining Dalit selfhood, and at the same time an assertion against oppressive, hegemonic and appropriating forces of Brahmanism. The conversion, thus demonstrated a modern spiritual thirst of Dalits for a society based on rational and ethical values. Apart from organizing and effecting mass historic conversion, Ambedkar also wrote a volume titled *Buddha and his Dhamma*. This volume was an attempt to reconstitute Buddhism as a vehicle of socio-ethical reconstitution that had implications not only on the Dalits' psyche, but also articulated a vision of a just and humane India and the world. The volume demonstrated a vision of the world based on reason, justice and peaceful coexistence.[57] It should be underlined that the Ambedkarian perspective saw justice and reason as necessary prerequisites for peaceful coexistence. Planning Buddha's *Dhamma* as a spiritual and social category, synonymous with morality, Ambedkar considered it as an instrument of management of society, which regulates relations between its members. Devoid of morality, society is prone to anarchy and extinction.

Along with the social and spiritual message of Buddhism, Ambedkar's conversion had a political context representing three major issues of his time: first, the categorization of a distinct identity of Untouchables as different from that of the Hindus, secondly, the construction of a distinct political philosophy for the masses and finally the placement/ positioning of a minority religion in the purview of the modern secular democratic state. In this regards Buddhism as an ideology played an important role in providing an impetus to construct new avenues towards social and

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[57]Christopher Queen, "Ambedkar's Dhamma; Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism", in Surendra Jondhale and Johanne's Beltz, (eds.) *Reconstructing the world: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, p. 139

political emancipation.

- Making of an Identity

Untouchability with its manifold manifestations is rooted in the notion of purity and pollution, which is believed to have developed in the later *Vedic* period, when Brahminic literature emerged in the form of *Smritis, Samhitas and Upnishads*. The Hindu doctrine of creation exemplified in the *Chaturvarna* scheme of social stratification does not clearly account for the design of untouchables, because all those who belong to the four *Varnas* are above the pollution line. However by implication, those who are below the pollution line form the fifth *Varna;* hence were called *"Panchamas"*. The identity of the Dalit was defined in the context of the doctrine of creation and its context was essentially religious. Legitimized by the theory of *Karma* and reincarnation, the *panchamas* deserve to be untouchables. This nomenclature was crystallized and transformed into multi-dimensional categories according to the particular context and the given time period.

Ambedkar however found that in the mainstream political arena, Mahatma Gandhi represented the orthodox categorization of Dalits under sophisticated religions maneuverings. He also noted that Gandhi firstly subscribed to caste but later opposed it but upheld the *Varna* instead. Ambedkar however, felt that the principle underlying Gandhi's conception of *Varna* was the same as that of caste, that is assigning social hierarchies on the basis of birth rather than worth. It led to graded inequality and the denial of freedom and equality, social relations that cannot beget Community bonds. The solution that Ambedkar proposed was that of annihilation of the caste system.

Ambedkar started constructing a separate identity of Untouchables during the second half of the 1940's. This was the period when the British were on the verge of leaving India and different social and religious groups were struggling to maximize their political assets. Ambedkar in this context identified himself with non-Brahmins

and attempted to build a non-Aryan *Naga* identity.[58] He pronounced the ancient rulers of central India, the *Nagas,* as the first converts to Buddhism. He also proposed to write on the clash of the Aryans and the *Nagas.* However, his exploration of the *Naga* identity remained quite thin.[59] It has to be noted that the thesis was proposed when Ambedkar was fighting for the recognition that the untouchables were a separately endowed element in India and therefore should be provided appropriate constitutional safeguards, while the colonial administration and Gandhian leadership were prepared to recognize only the Muslims and Sikhs as distinct communities.

The above mentioned political and ideological context shows that Ambedkar's construction of a distinct identity for 'Untouchables' has political dimensions. The conversion to Buddhism was one step ahead in respect to his vision. The conversion had not only demographic impact on the population, as it produced a new minority group in the society, but also helped the Dalits to construct their own culture, values and political philosophy on a more rational and secular basis. This movement destroyed the belief of the Gandhians that Hinduism would create an atmosphere of social harmony. This rejection of the Gandhian model of social Sanskritization is also an attempt to create a neo religious force based on modern rational and cultural values.

- ## Alternative Political Philosophy

Ambedkar's criticism of Gandhi and critical engagement with Marxism led him to ask a set of questions to which he found answer only in Buddha's *Dhamma.* His political philosophy is an attempt to substitute the paradigms of social change propagated by Gandhi and Marx. Along with this he was also critical of the western democracy which was in vogue in the 1930s and 1940s. Under this discourse, Ambedkar argued that political democracy is not self-sufficient and should correlate itself to social democracy.

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[58] Valerian Rodrigues, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p.383
[59] ibid

We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy[60]

Ambedkar proposed a radical transformation of caste system through his political philosophy. The social conflict among different castes, he noted were 'anti-national' in spirit, and wished for its total destruction. He made annihilation of caste system the core element of his thesis. But as noted earlier the failed domain of social reformism led him towards Buddhism to achieve his cherished goals. Buddha's Dhamma in his view have the potentials to build a social structure based on moral teachings which could transform the system of caste into a fraternal community. The Buddha's Gospel of liberty, equality and fraternity became the core principles of his political philosophy. Gandhi's ideal 'Chaturvarna' system was based on sanctioned hierarchies and thus was antithetical to democracy. Ambedkar endorsed the necessity of equality and fraternal values in between the members of community by bringing up Buddhism into the discourse over ideal society.

On the other hand, his debate with Marxism also helped him to demonstrate that the path chosen by the revolutionary Communists could provide equality and fraternity, but liberty will be absent in this realm. He was critical of the notion of "dictatorship, as it curtails liberty of individuals". He passed his verdict in favour of Buddhism, as he viewed "it could be a substitute for Communism". In his last speech on Buddhism, delivered at the International Buddhist Conference held at Katmandu, in 1956, he counterpoised Marx to Buddha, saying that,

Buddha aimed at achieving his ends by persuasion, moral teaching and love...so, Buddha would not allow violence, but the Communists do.[61]

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[60]Quoted in, Krishna B. Murthy, "The Buddhist Dhamma and the Marxist class Struggle", in *Ambedkar and Social Justice, Vol.II*, Published by the Director, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 1992, p. 112
[61]Ramesh H. Kamble, "Being a Buddhist: A case study in Bombay", *Journal of the Asiatic Society, Vol. XXXVIII* No.7, 1996.

Thus while appreciating some of the aspects of Marxism; he argued that Buddhism's moral and humanitarian aspects appealed to people and suite them best, because the system of Buddhism is democratic. Ambedkar resolution to follow the path of Buddha to achieve the ideal goals set up by the communists demonstrated his firm commitment for the values of individual freedom, peace and democracy.

- ### Conception of Modern Nation- State

After India got its independence in 1947, the issue before Ambedkar was how to generate the social conscience in the wake of religion getting divorced from morality, increasing communal tensions and the state becoming inadequate instruments of promoting morality, that is, liberty, equality, and fraternity in public. The modern state was upholding the ideals of democracy and social justice in a society which was closed for any kind of intervention in its internal 'sacred' domain governed by Hindu *dharma*. It is at this juncture that Ambedkar constructed the notion of 'Dhamma' as distinct from *dharma*. To him, 'Dhamma' could be the guiding principle of social conscience.[62] He noted that Buddha's teachings have several aspects which have close correspondence to the political arrangements of present day. The Buddha spoke about the equality of all human beings and classes and castes were artificial barriers erected by society. The only classification of human beings, according to the Buddha, is based on the quality of their moral conduct. The Buddha also encouraged the spirit of consultation and a democratic process conducive to fraternal relationship among citizens. Ambedkar's approach to political power is the moralization and the responsible use of public power. The Buddha also preached non violence and peace as universal principles.

Ambedkar's counter argument against Marxism and Gandhism are best articulated during the making of the constitution of independent India. Concerning the role of religion in public life both the ideological streams held extreme positions. Ambedkar had a realistic and practical solution to regulate the communal-castiest

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[62]Yashwant Sumant, "Situating Religion in Ambedkar's Political discourse" in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (Eds.) *Reconstructing the World. B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, p. 74.

extremes of religious ideology along with upholding the moral and spiritual values of 'true' religion. Religion was regarded as the driving force of Indian society against the 'economic-determinism' of orthodox Marxists. Ambedkar also comprehended the exploitative and hegemonic nature of Hindu Religion and endorsed the need of 'iron hand' of secular state to protect the liberty of every citizen from the dominance of any religion. Buddhism in this respect had a dual role to play; firstly, as a mode of protest it countered the dogmatic, conservative social values, which are hurdles in the progressive march of modern state. Buddhism was seen helpful in improving the psychological orientation of Dalits and other marginalized groups for a respectable and equal presence in society. By employing Buddhism, Ambedkar tried to release the permanent tension that existed between the objectives of modern nation state and the nature of Indian society. Firstly the refuge to Buddhism helped the individual to perceive the modern state as guarantor of their freedom as it is an agency which is meant to build a new society based on the values of equality and liberty. Secondly, the necessity of 'true' religion was endorsed in the domain of public life. Ambedkar proposed a religious doctrine based on moral principles and ethical values which are antithetical to casteism and communalism. Buddhism falsifies the impression of 'radical secularists' which sees religion as an ideological instrument of majority to perpetuate communal tensions in the society.

CHAPTER II

The New Dalit-Self:

Questioning the Limitations

of Secular State

Independent India is engaged in many–sided renaissance and reconstruction more or less consciously directed to what may compendiously be called nation-building, modernity or progressive development. The new vision of modern India sees a new society, overcoming many traditional fixations and embracing the new age of reason. As seen in the last chapter, since the National Independence Struggle the material locus of ideological debate on the shape of India's future has been confined between varied ideologies. The Gandhian conservatism and Marxian Socialism were again the two alternative paradigms which have had prominent influences in the building of political discourse over constitutional democracy in India. The Drafting Committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Ambedkar while negating both these pressures formulated a Constitution with the values of Secularism, Liberalism and Social Democracy. The accommodative system of governance which provides special safeguards to different minorities and social groups represents the acceptance of India's diversified social system by the State. The modern Nation-State in this respect played the role of moderator for the amelioration of Indian society which due to age old system of caste, poverty and belief in supernatural phenomenon restricted itself to underdevelopment and alien to the western notions of liberty, equality and social justice. Thus, the new constitutional democracy under the valid influence of western modernity understands Secularism and Social Justice as the two important pillars for the establishment of liberal values in Indian society.

Indian Constitution came into effect at a juncture when communal conflicts due to the Partition were yet to be resolved and the society was ruled by the feudal and Brahmanic caste-class system. These challenges had been envisaged by the constitution makers and a strong legal system, endorsing the need for secularism and legal safeguard for depressed castes was formulated. The interaction between these modern values and the orthodox religious communities has been exposed to various socio-political and economic changes over the last five decades which have brought valuable changes in the structure of Indian society.[63]

Secularism as a state policy always attracted logical appreciation along with huge criticism in India. To retain the beauty of plural society from the threat of communalism it is believed that secularism is a must doctrine. Secularism in this context is usually seen as an ideal under which no prominence will be given to any particular religion, especially Hindu, in deciding state policies. Many thinkers believed that this approach is antithetical to the traditional values of the country and view secularism as the product of western modernity[64] and failed to examine the necessity of such model to India. Also in the economic sphere, Nehru's development strategies were criticized for their extensive emphasis on planning and dependency on other developed countries. The critics failed to acknowledge the success it brought in developing the essential infrastructure for industrial development in India.

This chapter will try to focus on the relationship between the modern nation-state, religious authority and the Dalit-self. The secular fabric of Indian state compliments the commitment of India's social reformers and national independence leaders who locate the evils of religious order and fight against it. It makes the notion of secularism quite distinct in India as compared to the Western countries. The hypothesis being developed here is that, there were certain social reasons in support of Indian Secularism which countered the argument of making religion the ideology of India's polity as argued by Gandhi, Aurobindo and Vivekananda.

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[63]Ramesh Kamble, "Dalit Interpretation of Society", *Seminar*, 471-Nov. 1998
[64]See, T.N. Madan, "Secularism in its Place" in Rajeev Bhargava, (Ed.) *Secularism and its Critics*, Oxford, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 297-320

Further the creation of modern welfare state endorses the promise to create an economic democracy in India. It was argued that Secularism and overall economic welfare of masses will progressively destroy the primordial ruminants of caste orthodoxy and will create an equal social order. Under this construction an attempt has been made to investigate Ambedkar's disbelief in the commitment of modern secular State to provide equal rights to all its citizens as he has been criticized[65] for choosing the path of religious conversion to overcome the deprivation of Dalits under the Hindu religion.

Religion in the Critical Domain: The Rise of Socio-Political Movement

From the very beginning of civilization in India it has been noticed that there existed alternative social systems against the domination of caste based Hindu social order. Even during the Vedic period the philosophical approach of Upanishads differed from social norms and emphasized on questioning and reason.

The Upanishads are instinct with a spirit of inquiry, of mental adventure, of a passion for finding out the truth about things.[66]

Charvaka School in the same period gave a materialistic orientation to the philosophical discourse and established the roots of rational thoughts. This doctrine tries to explain mind and consciousness as the product of matter.[67] Buddhism and Jainism were among the first such two ideological/philosophical systems. Both were different from Hindu thought and proposed a normative order based on morality, truth and non-violence for community living.[68] Ambedkar noted in this context that Buddha's *Dhamma* is the *true* religion, the purpose of which was to reconstruct the world by establishing right relations among human beings.[69] In Hindu religion fraternal relationship is absent and graded hierarchy is the core value to control

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[65] W.N. Kuber, *Ambedkar a Critical Study*, PPH, New Delhi,1991, p. 98
[66] Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Oxford University Press, 2001,p. 75
[67] Satishchandra. Chatterjee. *Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, University of Calcutta. 1984. p. 26
[68] Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Oxford University Press, 2001.p. 75
[69] B.R. Ambedkar. *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, Buddha Bhoomi Publication. Nagpur. p. 316

society. By pointing out this discriminative relationship the *Bhakti* saints questioned the social evils that existed during the period through their devotional songs. This *Varkari* tradition, a strong devotional movement of *lower* castes had an aspiration that was--to gain equality in front of almighty God. They were responsible for rooting the foundation of transcendental universal brotherhood among the Hindu community. M.G. Ranade wrote about the historic importance of Bhakti movement:

The Religious Revival was not Brahmanical in its orthodoxy; it was heterodox in its spirit of protest against forms and ceremonies and class distinctions based on birth, and ethical in its preference of a pure heart, and of the law of love, to all other acquired merits and good works. This Religious Revival was also the work of the people, of the masses, and not of the classes. At its head were Saints and Prophets, Poets and Philosophers, who sprang chiefly from the lower orders of the society—tailors, carpenters, potters, gardeners, shop-keepers, and even Mahars— more often than Brahmans. [70]

Religious discourses in all the above mentioned time periods were not static but continuously under the scrutiny of these rational and progressive movements. This battle of ideas gave rise to two important philosophical trends in which religion became the central site for deliberation. The traditional conservative school believed in the ideals of caste system and *Brahmanic theology*. Counter to it, the reformist school believed in fraternity and equality as the two important elements of society. In both the trends the need of a religious order was essentialized by the thinkers.

The beginning of Nineteenth century brought religion back to public domain. This was also the period when the world noticed technological advancement and rise of common masses in support of their rights against the domination of feudal rulers and religious orthodoxy.[71] Karl Marx's radical means to *change the world* in this sphere are important as he looked upon religion in a more critical manner. To Marx, religion is an illusion which eases the pain produced by

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[70]Quoted in Eleanor Zelliot's *From Untouchables to Dalits*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001 p. 8

[71]H. G. Sabine and T L. Thorson. *A History of Political Theory*, (Fourth Edition) Oxford, New Delhi

exploitation and oppression. It is a series of myths which justifies and legitimises the subordination of the subject class and domination and privileges of the ruling class. In Marx's words,

> Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.[72]

Marx believed that religion does not solve the problem, rather it is simply a misguided attempt to make life more bearable.[73] Further, this Positivist position attacked religion by viewing it as an attempt of primitive man to explain the puzzling and often terrorizing natural phenomena. Religious beliefs are "False explanations", harmful to progress and should be replaced by scientific ones.[74] Here Marxian thought failed to explain the persistence role and ubiquity of religion in constructing or transforming tribal civilizations into modern civilizations. Moral and ethical values which existed throughout the history of humanity always pay homage to different religions. Max Weber, on other hand believed, that religion was part of broader meaning and motivational system within culture and civilization, and rejected the Marxist perspective that religion is always shaped by economic factors. Weber argued that the protestant ethics complimented the rise of capitalism in Europe. He argued that the spirit of capitalism is not simply a way of making money, but a way of life which has ethics, duties and obligations supported by Protestantism.[75] Weber sees the role of religion with a positive perspective and endorses its importance in modern world.

The Marxian and Weberian perspectives are important as both the trends objectified a research over the utility of religion for the dominant sections of the society. Further, they compliment each other in pointing out the changed nature of

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[72]Quoted in M. Haralambos, *Sociology Themes and Perspective* (Second Edition), Oxford, New Delhi, p. 460

[73]M. Haralambos, *Sociology Themes and Perspective* (Second Edition), Oxford, New Delhi, p. 464

[74]G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, New Age International (P) Limited, Publishers. New Delhi, p. 2

[75]M. Haralambos. *Sociology Themes and Perspective* (Second Edition), Oxford. New Delhi p. 466

religious discourse. Religion is not seen under the premise of ecclesiastical order but through the prism of rational thought and scientific temperament. Under this area of enquiry, the relationship between individual, religion and society was deliberated. Traditional religions faced the collective attack from liberal individual-centric philosophical trends along with radicalists who sees religion as the hurdle in their revolutionary project. This formulation that "Man makes religion, religion does not make man" contributed in bringing up the concerns of common man into religious subjectivity. The divine, transcendental values of religion were questioned under the realm of broader human development. Human emancipation is not limited to ecclesiastic realms but science and modern state and discourse over rights developed the new paradigms for a progressive and secular world.

The Nineteenth century India also witnessed the rise of wider reformist discourse under the influence of British colonialism and western thoughts. Further to protect the inner domain of Hindu religion from the onslaught of Christianity and Islam, the reformist agenda viewed it as imperative to target the social evils existing in the society. Religion in India is an authoritative governing enterprise which not only worked as a dominant ideology in establishing the norms, customs and cultural values of social system but it also operates the State machinery to endorse their working culture in all other spheres of life. The religious conceptions in India were so vast that it covered every aspect of life from birth to death.[76]

In this respect, Hindu religion became the area of enquiry for the reformers as it upheld the most degraded and exploitative practices in social and political sphere. Hinduism is collective baggage of Brahmanical supremacy, patriarchy, supernatural value system and belief based in *Karma*[77] theory. It produced a dogmatic and unequal society based on *Varna* system with *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* at the upper ladder of purity and *Shudhras* and Untouchables at the lower level as impure. The caste system has acted as a source and mechanism for the

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[76]W.N. KUBER, *Ambedkar a Critical Study*, PPH, New Delhi,1991, p. 75

[77]*Karma* theory in Hinduism represents that a person's status and experience in this life is shaped by the balance of good or evil deeds done in previous lives.

[78]Uma Chakravarthi, "Conceptualizing Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 3, 1993

exclusion of the lower castes resulting in their disadvantage and deprivation. The perpetual deprivation of these people because of their different social behavior (Beef eating, worshiping non-Hindu deities etc), especially the untouchables, resulted into categorizing them outside the fold of *Varna* system. *Manu*, the Hindu law maker, denoted them as *a-varna, Dasa, Chandala, Achut* etc. Also, except perhaps in the early periods of Vedic times, woman was assigned a position subordinate to man. There was absence of gender equality before law. Society and family was governed under a strict patriarchal set up. Uma Chakravarty remarked;

A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanctions for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and lower castes have been subjugated to humiliating conditions of existence. Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of the Brahminical social order.[79]

It was but natural that elimination of such an atrocious social phenomena based on caste and gender discrimination became the main concern of social thinkers and reformers in the Nineteenth century India.

The Nineteenth century religious reform movements proposed two separate guidelines to fight Social evils propagated by Hinduism. Firstly, the upper caste elite reformers maintained that more than religious reconstruction the need is to make the social milieu a shared platform for all inhabitants. Social relevance of existing religion was judged by a rationalist critique and religious universalism.[80] Traditional Hindu religion was attacked and alternative religious sects were proposed. *Brahmo Samaj* in Bengal, *Prarthna Samaj* in Maharashtra, and *Arya Samaj* in Punjab and North India are some of the prominent religious alternatives. To relate social reformism to broader struggle of National Independence they made equality as essential claim of individuals both in religious and political sphere. They strove to extend the principle of individual liberty to the sphere of religion. These reformists'

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[80]Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence*, Penguin Books, 1989, p. 84

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endeavors to recast the old religion into a new form suited to meet the needs of new society.[81] Bipan Chandra commented;

> In the religious sphere they (Social Reformers) sought to remove idolatry, polytheism and priestly monopoly of religious knowledge and to simplify religious rituals. They were important not for purely religious reasons but equally for their social implications.[82]

This outlook represents Weberian perspective towards religion. It was believed that a changed social system will automatically supplement the broader struggle for constructing democratic ethos and national consciousness among general masses. Further a necessity of religious reform was essentialized for future society based on respect and brotherhood.

The other school of thought to which Gail Omvedt called as "Historical Materialist"[83] or Non-Brahman Movement, had a radical approach and remarked that religion ruled by Brahmins is the main contributor in the making of the social and political hierarchy extremely exploitative. Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra was the first to articulate a theoretical conception to achieve the goal of abolition of caste, patriarchal oppression and class exploitation. He agreed with the elite reformist that Hindu scriptures necessarily implied observation of caste hierarchy and therefore it is necessary to reform it. But Phule also radically departed from the former school as he remarked that total abolition of *Varna* system and Hindu religious scriptures is compulsory. Secondly, he envisaged an ideal *Bali* state of beneficence, castelessness and prosperity,[84] different from the elite reformers who debated the validity of *sacred* religious texts (*Arya Samaj*) and even tried to argue for spiritual justification to social change in or even abolition of the *jati* and *Varna* system (Ram Mohan Roy, Agarkar, etc). Phule's approach could supplement Marxian thoughts as both agreed to build a platform of exploited masses (Working class/*Shudhra-AtiShudhra*) against the domination of ruling elites (Capitalist/*Brahman-Bhatji* Rule). G.P. Deshpande

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[81] A.R. Desai. *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay p. 282
[82] Bipan Chandra. *India's Struggle for Independence*. Penguin Books, 1989, p. 87
[83] Gail Omvedt. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, Sage Publication, New Delhi,1994, p. 23
[84] Gail Omvedt. *Dalit Vision*, Orient Longman limited 1995. p. 20

argues, "Phule was the first Indian system builder" providing a "logic of history" as Hegel did in Europe.[85]

Later anti-caste movements in India regard Phule as a founding figure in developing a concrete theory and revolutionizing the movement of *lower* castes. Hindu religion became the target of attack for them as they locate it as Brahmanical, caste bound and irrational with absence of any *religious* motives. Phule had also tried to evolve a theistic religion "*Satyashodhak Samaj*" to propose an alternative to dominant caste culture. Following the same trend the non-Brahmanic Movement in Tamilnadu tried to claim Saivism as an independent religion. Narayanswami Guru formulated 'one religion, one caste, and one God for mankind'.[86] Religious conversion of lower castes into Islam and Christianity was also noted.[87] Also, as an alternative, Periyar Ramaswamy in Tamilnadu proposed atheism. Whatever the specificities, the rejection of Hinduism remained the main feature in the battle of ideas over religion.

The main motive of both the above mentioned trends was to propose a set of social values and principles suitable for every individual for independent progress without any kind of discrimination. It helped the Dalit movement later on as the theoretical base for arguing their rights against British rule and Indian Nationalist Elites. The modern Dalit identity and its ideological assertion pay homage to the legacy of these social upsurges. Both these movements created an atmosphere in which issues related to caste, gender, education and Nationalism were discussed in a broader frame work of rights, liberty and justice. Traditional Hindu religion was treated as antithetical to modern values proposed by western liberalism. Dr. Ambedkar was greatly impressed and influenced by this historic development in Nineteenth century, especially with the works of M.G. Ranade and Jyotiba Phule. This helped him to develop a concrete view about caste problem in India. Finally, the political debates on religion in India concentrate on the independence of individual in the religious sphere and how religion is able to change its fabric to meet the

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[85]Quoted in Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Vision*, Orient Longman limited 1995, p. 23
[86]Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, Sage Publication, New Delhi,1994, p. 12
[87]Oliver Mendelsohn, and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables*, Cambridge University Press. 2000, p.86

requirements of modernist nation-state. Indian Secularism with the contents of social justice and an interventionist approach towards religion is the legacy of India's Religious Reform Movements. Individual Rights and freedom in the domain of religion are seen as vital for a democratic progression of society.

Secularism in India: Responsible and Distinct

The change which we should all seek is thus a change from constraint to freedom, from credulity to faith, from status to contract, from authority to reason, from unorganized to organised life, from bigotry to toleration, from blind fatalism to a sense of human dignity. This is what I understand by social revolution both for individuals and for societies in this country.[88]

- M.G. Ranade

Among the basic component of modern Nation, Secularism has been seen as vital to the pluralist society like India. Secular polity in India is distinct from the western model of secularism because of its nature of responsibility and commitment to the agenda of social change. Article 25(1) of the Indian Constitution gives everyone the fundamental right to "profess, practice, or propagate religion," a right that is only circumscribed by consideration of "public order, morality, and health".[89] It was introduced in the Constitution amidst the wide opposition of powerful Hindu lobbies who vehemently demanded a ban on conversions altogether. According to Prof. D. Smith view, the strict separation of religion and state is necessary for equal citizenship of the individual. Further he is not content with the state's role in targeting Hindu religion On this account, the interventionist ideology of state is seen as antithetical to secularism as it prefers a religious community over others. Prof. D. Smith argues,

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[88] Y. D. Phadke, *Social Reformers of Maharashtra*, Maharashtra information Centre, Mumbai, 1985, p. 77

[89] Gauri Vishwanathan, *Outside the Fold*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004. p. xii

It is not in the interest of the secular state to strengthen the social role of communities as such. Far from it. Indeed, the present proliferation of highly organised caste associations is a trend which to some degree undermines the secular state.[90]

He further adds:

It is in the interest of the secular state to strengthen the internal autonomy of religious denominations, although this is little realized by various legislatures. The demand for social reform and religious reform is so pressing that little attention is paid to the principle of separation of religion and state.[91]

Taking the United States as his model for the neutrality of the state in the matter of religion, Smith found the Indian State insufficiently secular because of the initiative it had taken in reforming the law, religious institutions and practices of the Hindus.

The nature of Indian secularism is different from what Prof. D. Smith is idealizing as it provides a different picture of *state-religion-individual* relationship against Smith's model of 'perfect' secularism. Contrary, India accepts a kind of *political secularism*[92] which justifies the reformist mode of state in people's social milieu. Hindu caste system which is responsible for degradation and segregation of a large section of people (Dalits) and absence of communal harmony in between religions led Indian secularism to divert from 'perfect' secularism and work for bringing reform in society. It found its impetus from the critical domain of Reformist Movement of Nineteenth Century India and Ambedkar's struggle which made citizens understand the necessity of such a secular polity for India.

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[90]D.E. Smith, "India as a Secular State" in Rajeev Bhargava, (Ed.), *Secularism and its Critics*, Oxford, New Delhi, 2004, p. 203
[91]ibid.. p. 204
[92]See Rajeev Bhargava, "What is Secularism For" in *Secularism and its Critics* (Ed), Oxford, New Delhi, 2004

Secularism in India should be seen as the by product of inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts and other deep-seated pluralisms of diverse kinds. In the context of continuous religious warfare and more general in the face of irresolvable conflicts, political elites proposed a conception of secularism, in which the following two things were underlined. First, religion as political instrument is most decisive and dangerous for minorities under a democratic polity and therefore state regulations are required to secularize the public domain. Secondly, it was also noted that the Indian sub-continent is deeply religious. Religious customs, ethics, rituals and other cultural norms are essential part of their daily life. This value system based on local cultures is helpful for the natives to form a community which reinforces their identity in public. In such domain it is futile to bank upon the ideal of "separation of religion" doctrine. Therefore it was assumed that a relative autonomy of religion is legitimate in which state intervention is not permitted. In this background the doctrine of Political Secularism in India was formulated. It not only gives prominence and respect to religious subjectivity of its citizens but also ensure constitutional safeguards so that the ideology of religion could not be utilized to suppress the democratic principles in public. It balances the twin spheres of religion and politics which we understand as 'private' and 'public' domains respectively. This articulation is 'soft' over the issue of strict separation of religion and maintains a partial contact with religion in the matters of state affairs. The balance created by such secularism was remarked as positive and essential for Indian polity:

> Secular politics derives its strength from two sources. It retains the 'purity' of religion. And it also promotes reason in the sense that the explanation of socio-economic conflicts has to be sought in this world only. Religion and politics exists together occupying two different spaces.[93]

Secularism as a liberal doctrine locates individuals in the domain of religion with some fundamental rights. The discourse of individual rights and responsibility of state to promote and protect those rights is one of the main factors in keeping

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[93]Naseer Tayabji, "Political Economy of Secularism: Rediscovery of India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 1994

religion at a residual role. Thus in India, political secularism envisaged a constructive functioning of State in a society governed by the most exploitative social system called as Hinduism. This form of secularism is unique and it is critical to the notions of cultural and religious superiority of Hinduism propagated by *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) and other right wing forces. The acceptance of such a model should not be considered as the sole contribution of India's independence struggle, but the legacy to articulate such unique secularism goes back to the upholders of rational and scientific values, who from the rise of human civilization argued to humanize the relationship between man and religion against the dogmatic and priest centered religious authorities.

The constitutional principles of modern state hypothesized the functioning of society on the above stated values of secularism. Ambedkar was influenced by the openness and liberal values of western political thoughts, although he was also conscious of the limitations of liberal democracy in the emancipatory project he had undertaken. He observed that in India the inner space (society) was colonized by Brahmanism and for such a society the western notions of liberty, secularism and democracy will not have any meaning unless it kills 'the ghost of caste'. This dichotomy in between Hindu colonization of society and a modern liberated nation led him to warn the Constituent Assembly that if equality in the socio-economic sphere is not achieved within a reasonable time, the disadvantaged people would 'blast off the structure of political democracy'.

The second objection to liberal democracy could be drawn from the cultural front. In India the history of social and political change is not as rich as in the West in terms of struggles for liberation from tyranny and exploitation. Barring minor exceptions India has been ruled by a dull and monotonous series of absolute monarchs for nearly two thousand five hundred years. Only at socio-religious level this dull monotony was attacked. Brahminical Hinduism was challenged by Buddhism and Jainism by providing a moral set of social principles. These socio-religious modes of consciousness and forms in India have been multidimensional as opposed to the unidimensionality of political form and consciousness prevalent in the

West. Therefore the outsider's outlook based on western ideas appears less authentic and somewhat artificial in India's context. Since the learned elites of our country did not make effort to study this stream of counter culture to challenge the religious orthodoxy in India, they borrowed modern political ideas from the West to do the same. Secularism is one of such doctrines which appear as a genuine model to regulate the religious plurality of India. But it does not provide positive mechanism to counter the communal and caste prejudices prevalent in the society. Ambedkar located these limitations of Western ideas in India's context and therefore utilized indigenous modes of resistance by instrumentalizing moral and rational elements of Buddha Dhamma. He applies the values of equality, brotherhood and liberty, which existed in religious discourses, to combat the communal and caste hatred of Hindu community.

Dalit-Self: Facing the Limitations of Modern Nation State

Before the advent of Western Political Thought in India, Indian society was governed according to the rules of the Brahmanic caste system. When the state was ruled by the Muslims during the medieval period, even then the social fabric of the Indian society i.e. the caste system remained unchanged to a great extent. The British rule in India led to the shattering of the economic foundation of castes by introducing new means of livelihood. This gave to the Indians, especially the lower castes, the taste of individual freedom, uniform system of law and steady industrialization, something which was unprecedented for them. The Hindu state recommended varying punishments for the same offence to members of different castes. The British passed legislations like-- the Caste Disabilities Removal Act 1850, The Special Marriage Act 1872 and the Special Marriage Amendment Act 1923, that contributed to the undermining the edifice of caste.[94] Also, the capitalist mode of economy with its modern cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Surat and Delhi helped to do away with a number of caste taboos and restrictions in the industrial regions. Further neutrality towards dominant religions, Hindu and Islam, and a state governed by the principles

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[94]A.R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1959, p. 249

of Rights and common law for all, provide a strong background for the formation of secularism in India.

The nationalist elites under the wave of the independence struggle neglected the spirit of social reformism. The political outfit of western educated elites, the Indian National Congress, initially gave no room to the question of social reforms in their aims and objectives of policy framework. Dadabhai Nauroji as the president of second session of Indian National Congress remarked;

> We are met together as a political body to represent to our rulers our
> political aspirations, not to discuss social reform... [95]

The National Congress earlier was indifferent to social evils because they concentrated on the larger issues of religious tolerance between the various communities; Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis etc, to form a broader platform of Indian people for negotiation with Imperial rule. The need of internal transformation of Hindu religion with the help of modern state was reestablished only after 1920 with the advent of Bhimrao Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru on the socio-political arena of India. The modernist vision of both the leaders perceived a state that was responsive to the social and economic evils of contemporary Indian society.

> On 26 January 1950, we are going to enter a life of contradiction. In
> politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will
> have inequality...we must remove this contradiction at earliest, or else
> those who suffer from inequality will blow its structure of political
> democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up.[96]

The Constitution of India bears considerable impact of the two great thinkers of our times, Ambedkar and Nehru; they were quintessentially modern in their approach and underscored the legitimate role of state in changing society.

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[95]B. R. Ambedkar. *Writings and Speeches, Volume 9*, edited by Vasant Moon (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra Education Department. 1982) p. 7

[96]Dhananjay Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar Life and Mission*. Popular Prakashan. Bombay 1981. p. 415

Under their able guidance secularism in India was constructed in which religion was to play an increasingly residual role, preferably that of retreating to the domain of personal faith. Secondly, noting the fact that in Indian society religion had been given vast expansive jurisdiction so as to cover the whole of life of the individual and to prevent the legislature from encroaching upon that field Ambedkar argued in the Constituent Assembly:

> We are having the liberty in order to reform our social system, which is full of inequalities, so full of inequalities, discrimination and other things which conflict with our fundamental rights.[97]

For Nehru, democratization and authority for reforms were essentially the means to move towards the larger objectives of nation building and economic development. His religious policy construed religion in terms of its social consequences. This understanding then got translated into social policies for equal rights, a uniform civil code, positive discrimination, spread of education, and removal of superstition.

The modern Indian state looked with optimism the possibility of solving the problems of untouchables, which was viewed as part of a larger project of modernisation. It was believed that given the strong commitment of the state, towards Secularism and State Socialism, the welfare of the downtrodden masses is inevitable and in the age of nationalism and political freedom the narrow boundaries of caste will be demolished. Political democracy, which endorses popular participation of large adult population, was seen as the method where people will actualize their *General Will* to form a responsible government. The state in India, under a broader liberal framework represents a Weberian outlook that underscores the monopoly over coercive means and upholds legitimate authority for rule making. It was and owed with the capacity to actually penetrate into civil society and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm. Further, the democratic institutions like the Parliament, State Assemblies and other Local bodies were designed so that socio-political groups, civil society and individuals could

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[97]W.N. Kuber, *Ambedkar a Critical Study*, PPH, New Delhi,1991, p. 128

maximize their interests by using the modern means of participation in governance. It was considered as the 'March of God on Earth' as it represented the benevolent stance towards its citizens and symbolized the Will of the nation. The constitution makers conceived the state as the practical embodiment of national spirit and destiny. It was the realm of freedom in which the ideas of reason, morality, and progress were embodied. As such it was above and distinct, from the real arrangement of civil society and from the rules of private morality of casteism that controls the psyche and actions of citizens.

In this regard the state got legitimacy to control and reform the society, keeping in mind the inability of the social milieu to undertake such a task. The presence of moral and fraternal values are pre-requisites for a peaceful working of a democratic constitution, as Ambedkar noticed, it were absent in Indian society. Therefore he argued that it was to be the work of modern state to cultivate such values. He said:

> Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realize that our people have yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic.[98]

The concept of 'liberty' or 'freedom' is useful here as the Constitution is committed to protect the citizens from any kind of suppression in civil life. Liberty, as Ambedkar understood it was a force behind social change, a voice of the oppressed, it was a reaction against injustice, and it was an effort to reestablish human values against the authoritarian, non-democratic social system. In India, the struggle for liberty involved a positive response to the claims of individuals or groups, who because of a particular tradition and culture were alienated from the basic rights of freedom. Ambedkar envisaged the role of state in this arena because it was, according to him, the instrument or agency for regulating the relationship between society and individual and it was the duty of the state to create a space

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[98]Quoted in Valerian Rodrigues, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p. 485

where there won't be any denial of human liberties. However, Ambedkar was also apprehensive of the liberal model which claimed absolute liberty to every one without any state intervention. The early liberals, who stood for liberty in all spheres insisted, that the law must enforce all contracts (with certain exceptions, such as, in the case of contract of slavery), since each individual was the best judge of his/her own interest, and he/she used his/her judgment before entering into any contract. The state therefore, was not allowed to impose its own conception of 'good' on the individuals in their mutual dealings.[99] The idea of such liberty led to the doctrine of *laissez-faire*, which implies freedom from government intervention in economic sphere. Hence, most of the advocates of this kind of liberty, such as Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, Henry Sidgwick and Herbert Spencer, favoured a minimal state.

Ambedkar found that such an ideological formation is wrongly conceptualized and unsuitable for the progress of democracy. He observed,

Of the erroneous ideologies which have been responsible for the failure
of parliamentary democracy I have no doubt that the idea of freedom
of contract is one of them. The idea became sanctified and was upheld
in the name of liberty.[100]

As political liberty does not pay ample attention to other inequalities existing in social and economic sphere, the profits of this value will only be seized by the powerful ruling elites. He further added,

Parliamentary democracy took no notice of economic inequalities and
did not care to examine the result of freedom of contract on the parties
to the contract, in spite of the fact that they were unequal in the
bargaining power. It did not mind if the freedom of contract gave the
strong the opportunity to defraud the week. The result is that

[99]Alexander Myron., *An Introduction to Political Theory*, Macmillan, London, 2002, p. 241
[100]Quoted in Valerian Rodrigues *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2002, p. 62

parliamentary democracy in standing out as a protagonist of liberty has continuously added to the economic wrongs of the poor, the downtrodden and the disinherited class. [101]

The Indian constitution provides for all the basic human liberties and fundamental rights making individual as the bearer of these rights. For Ambedkar, such generalization of these important values would be of no use if the socio-economic conditions are not supportive in their respective fields. Liberty is not something that an individual enjoys in isolation or by being left alone; but the very conditions of his existence bring him into a natural relation with other individuals and civil society. The effective guarantee of freedom materializes only if the total users of freedom recognize the equality of all as the primary condition. In the second place, the rights which are essential for freedom must be such that it secures the liberties of all and not merely of the minority. For Ambedkar, treating liberty as a separate principle was erroneous and therefore he recommended the acceptance of three combined principles for a real social democracy: liberty, equality and fraternity.

Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things.[102]

The political benefits and rights which the modern state disburses to its people are based on the criteria of individual's claim to enjoy them. This conceptualization of rights is not critical of the nature of the socio-economic relations in which the individual is bound. Ambedkar held that the common interest can be served only by creating socio-economic conditions conducive to the enjoyment of freedom within society. These conditions involved access to the material means of satisfaction of wants and the opportunity for self development.

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[101]ibid, p. 62

[102]Quoted in Yurlova Eugenia, "Social Equality and Democracy in Ambedkar's Understanding of Buddhism" in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (Eds), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* Oxford University Press, 2004, New Delhi, p. 89

The key to freedom lies in a rational system of society which can provide the means of satisfaction and an urge for development by using all human potentials. The material benefits of the state system could be exploited by the servile class only by making their position equal to other social groups of the society. Otherwise rights of any sort will be futile if there was no social recognition. Ambedkar judged that the Hindu social system is antagonistic to human freedom and therefore the rectification of such a social order is primary to build modern nation state in India.

The traditional religious Hindu identity of untouchables through religious texts and customs legitimizes a hierarchical caste order based on birth, keeping Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishayas and Shudhras on the upper ladder of purity and Dalits at the lowest as impure. This system is a product of religious sanctions, which were consistently endorsed by the traditional Brahminical value system. The caste system has acted as a source and mechanism of exclusion for Dalits resulting into disadvantage and deprivation. The perpetual deprivation of the people belonging to the lowest rung of the caste system resulted in the absence of all economic, social or cultural rights. Their identity was permanently attached to their respective jobs and there was hardly any scope to resist this obligation in a given situation.

Alone, the Untouchables are permanently polluted people. Their status is said to arise from the work they perform, such as skinning animal carcasses, tanning leather and making shoes; playing in musical bands; butchery of animals; fishing; removal of human waste; attendance at cremation grounds; washing clothes; coconut harvesting and brewing of toddy, to name some of the principal grounds of permanent pollution. Ostensibly, then, today's Untouchables – all 150 million of them – are descended from persons polluted by their unclean work.[103]

Ambedkar's argument for social reforms was directed against the upper castes elites who during the freedom struggle argued that there was no denial of social rights of the untouchables for which they need protection from the state. They

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[103]Oliver Mendelsohn, and Marika Vicziany. *The Untouchables*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p. 7

argued that if there was such a case society will initiate the needed measures. Under such moral 'Gandhian' attitude, the minimum fundamental rights for Dalits were opposed by the upper caste Hindu community. Therefore Ambedkar perceived that the formal framework democracy is of no value and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy.[104]

Ambedkar's contribution has been highly appreciated for his non-compromising attitude for social reforms and for his positive approach to consider state apparatus as the main mode for ensuring social justice and peaceful coexistence. This has been highlighted in our examination of the social background through which the modern state developed as a sensitive and responsible agent to promote secularism and social welfare in a society deeply rooted with social and individual antagonism. Therefore the reformist initiatives of state were welcomed by majority of the people with an optimism that the political tone of development and welfare would result in creating real social and economic democracy. At a stage when the state itself was forthcoming to lead a progressive march towards future, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism has been considered as a paradox and antagonistic to the nature of modern state which ensures universal law, common citizenship and a secular polity to control dogmatic religious ideology in social and political milieu.[105] Conversion also targets the Gandhian belief that moral transformation of society is possible within the realm of Hindu religion.

Ambedkar's decision to embrace Buddhism brings out the limitations of both the possible domains, secular state and Hindu religion, in which deliberation over the future of Dalits could have been carried out. This paradox of conversion can be judged by analyzing the supreme authority of Hinduism which does not allow Dalits to enjoy equal status and freedom and also put limitations to the democratic temperament of state activities. In between the growing tensions of modernity and traditional orthodox social system, Ambedkar wished to transcend the narrow boundaries created by the dichotomy of state and religion. Buddhism, in the realm of

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[104]B.R. Ambedkar. "Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah" in *Writings and Speeches, Volume 1*, edited by Vasant Moon (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra Education Department) 1982,
[105]W.N.Kuber, *Ambedkar a Critical Study*, PPH, New Delhi,1991, p. 98

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new state was seen as an emancipatory project for the whole society which is then contaminated by the disease of casteism.

Conversion to Buddhism: The New Dalit-Self

To enjoy the benefits of political freedom every individual needs equal stature in public sphere. The 'Untouchable self' which was released to engage in the democratic polity was blemished and degraded because of his/her non dignified presence in the public sphere. The 'Untouchable self' lacked essential stimulant of moral capital and self respect which are the pre-requisites to mobilize people for their social, political and economic demands and to make any contract in public. To exercise the political rights, certain prior conditions are required. It is not enough to give rights unless they begin to appreciate themselves by believing in their capabilities to enjoy rights. Ambedkar detected the reason of such inability in the Hindu caste system. He said:

> How can Untouchables stay in Hinduism? Untouchability is the lowest depth to which the degradation of a human being can be carried. To be poor is bad but not so bad as to be an untouchable. The poor can be proud. The Untouchable cannot be.[106]

He further added:

> That Hinduism is inconsistent with the self–respect and honor of the Untouchables is the strongest ground which justifies the conversion of the Untouchables to another nobler faith.[107]

The conversion to Buddhism was an attempt to revive the 'Untouchable self' with a new moral feeling and identity of pride which is comparable with the citizenship in the modern state. In the given engagement with Hinduism there is no

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[106]Quoted in Valerian Rodrigues *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*. Oxford University Press. New Delhi, 2002, p. 229
[107]ibid

scope to appreciate liberty, equality, fraternity and the democratic values guaranteed by the constitution. Ambedkar also realized that Brahmanism constituted the foundation of Hindu social order and in the political domain as a modified form, it nurtured communalism. To protect the secular polity from the domination of Hindu communalism, Brahmanism should be attacked from within and without.[108] With this view in mind Ambedkar developed religious conversion to Buddhism as a mode to supplement the nature of modern Indian state.

Ambedkar argued that the absence of moral principles and fraternal values in Hindu society resulted into the strict ghettoisation of all caste communities. His ardent critique of Hinduism and his construction of *Dhamma* were efforts to promote social conscience and moral values in the social realm. Ambedkar also believed that Politics is another sphere where there is a possibility to engage people in a civilizing activity. Yashwant Suman noted this optimism of Ambedkar as follows:

> He (Ambedkar) stated that politics has two major purposes to serve. One is to assure governance and other is to civilize people. According to Ambedkar, civilization paves the way for the development of individual. Politics as civilizing enterprise must provide opportunities for the development of the potentialities of the individual. If these opportunities are denied, politics ceases to be a civilizing enterprise. It is then concerned more with the process of governance than with the betterment and well being of the individual.[109]

Under the purview of modern nation-state it was believed that the constitution with its principles of liberalism, secularism and social justice would be helpful in civilizing the people. He also realized that Brahmanism constituted the foundation of Hindu Society which brings limitations to the bourgeois state. The caste system remained the main hurdle in the development of the nation. Under this context Ambedkar proposed the secular role of religion in creating moral values

[108]Yahwant Suman, "Situating Religion in Ambedkar's Political Discourse" in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (Eds) *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, p. 76
[109]ibid, p.75

favorable to modernity, secularism and brotherhood. Thus, along with endorsing the essentiality of religion in society Ambedkar also illustrated its fundamental characteristics. Buddhism was uphold and embraced as a modern doctrine of moral principles in order to complement the political functionality to transform the society. The propagation of the Buddha's *dhamma* could be seen as an effective means used to revolutionalize society towards a humane world.

> Buddhism teaches social freedom, economic freedom, intellectual freedom and political freedom...equality not between man and man but between man and women.[110]

Ambedkar tried to cease the tension between modernity and religion by exploring a religious doctrine which would became the most suitable ideology of the society for the functioning of the modern state.

Under this background two formulations could be derived by viewing Ambedkar's engagement with modern state and analyzing his philosophy of religion. First, the state as a civilizing enterprise is committed to promote political liberty and equality but its progress depends more upon *internal limitations of governing class than upon external limitations*. The internal limitations mean the outlook to judge these values, traditions, vested interests and the social philosophy of the governing class. Brahmanism, the ideology of governance in India is antagonistic to upholding the values of constitutional morality. The value of caste superiority/inferiority is a hurdle in making social system conducive to liberty and equality. The social sphere was untouched with the progress of modernity and freedom. The well-being of servile class was possible only by enlightening them about their deprived condition and by giving a robust meaning to their 'self' so that they can energize themselves to change the system with the help of state. The enormous importance of conversion lies in the fact that it carried a philosophical trend which is against the social philosophy of Hinduism. One should also acknowledge that the surpassing value of morality in conversion will surpass the scientific enquiry of modern state which is

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[110]B.R. Ambedkar, *Buddha and the Future of His Religion*, Paras, Nagpur, 1991 p. 4

limited in combating religious orthodoxy. Secondly, Religious conversion in India begins the debate over the limitations of state, the role of religion in private life, morals and Secularism. The modern state with its modernist, scientific temperament confined to the phenomenal world, can hardly affect the supremacy of religion and its orthodox degraded laws. The realities of religion are actually transcending or not in the control of the modern state. The philosophical depth with a moral conviction is not possible for a state that gives equal respect to all religions or remains neutral. Ambedkar noticing these limitations of modern bourgeois state formulated an alternative set up to counter the social evils prescribed by orthodox social philosophy. His response was to idealize both the state and society on the grounds of moral and liberal values. Conversion to Buddhism was a motive to instill morality in the public domain which due to the dominance of modern scientific inquiry of liberals and orthodox religious theology lost its essence. Further he emphasized on dignity, self respect and fraternity as the essential elements to enjoy the fruits of modern democracy rather than banking on natural rights, utility or moral trusteeship.

CHAPTER III

Outside the Fold -

Conversion and Making

of Alternative Community

Hitherto we have attempted to establish that Ambedkar's religious conversion was a strategy to develop a religio-ideological substitute to Gandhi's political ideological project and Marxist conception of class struggle respectively. This idea of conversion in Ambedkar is closely bound with the notion of a moral community. He felt that such a community can be imagined only by creating consciousness about the values of liberty, equality and fraternity in the society. An attempt has been made to relate conversion with some of the important elements in political science such as ideology, modernity, secularism, citizen, rights, self, state etc. to locate the space for the newly constructed identity. In this chapter we will deliberate on the notion of community and individual self in the post conversion period.

In contemporary political and sociological discourses there is vast material available to study the impact of religious conversion on Dalits in India. This debate can be divided into two distinct parts. The first group of social scientists studied conversion with a negative approach, by terming it as 'narrow minded' and 'unethical.[111] They refer to Gandhi and Vivekananda as authorities in the domain of religious discourses. They also believed that 'poverty, ignorance and weakness of the poor' were the main reasons which led them to fall into the trap of missionaries' illicit game of proselytizing.[112] They also try to judge the impact of conversion by examining the change in their social and economic sphere. According to them the

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[111]M.V. Nadkarni, *Ethics and Relevance of Conversion*, Economic and Political Weekly, January 18, 2003

[112]Koenraad Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind- ideological development of Hindu revivalism*, Rupa and Co, New Delhi. 2001, p. XVII

converted Dalits have continued to carry on old practices of worship, festivals and rituals in accordance with Hindu beliefs. Thus their religious conversion is nothing but just a token opposition to their prior condition. As there is no material incentive in conversion (as in reservation in government jobs and other similar facilities) they (Dalits) stick to their old caste identities to reap the benefits of government policies which result in an unethical maneuvering of their social status.[113] Finally, conversion is targeted as a 'false consciousness' where a converted community or individual deliberately attempts to pit one religion against another. This school upholds the belief that every religion advocates the ethical doctrine of universal brotherhood and a path of spiritual salvation. They argue that all religion are equal and God can be realized through any path by true devotion and social service, whatever be the banner under which it is done. This 'Anti-conversion' school raises several issues questioning the 'change' conversion has brought in the life of Dalits and finds it insignificant and inconsequential as a mode of resistance to ameliorate their socio-economic conditions.

The second school of thought has a positive approach in locating the importance and change that conversion has brought into the life of Dalits. Dalit conversion is seen as a part of larger struggle aimed at regaining 'dalit selfhood' and at the same time, an assertion against oppressive, hegemonic and appropriating forces of Brahmanism.[114] They emphasize on the 'psychological' change among Dalits and on the deconstruction of old religious beliefs into new ones rather than examining the material benefits.[115] More than a soteriological, theological or metaphysical choice, the impact of conversion is considered as crucial in developing spiritual and religious faith among the believers.[116] Conversion is also seen as a conscious attempt by a collective-community or individual not only to separate himself/herself from the oppressive caste system but also as a mode of learning to use the modern constitutional safeguards meant for individual and social emancipation. Citizen rights

[113]Vishnu K. Bhat, "Democracy and Faith in India", in B.L. Smith's (Ed) *Social and Religious Conflict in South Asia*. University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 125-137

[114]Ramesh Kamble, "Contextualizing Ambedkarian Conversion", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Oct. 11, 2003.

[115]Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, pp. 218- 221

[116]Gary Tartakov, "B.R. Ambedkar and the Navayana Diksha" in Sathianathan Clarke, and Rowena Robinson (Eds) *Religious Conversion in India*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, p. 194

and secular commitments of state are regarded as progressive steps in supplementing the positive values of conversion.[117] This school demonstrates the act of conversion as a confidence building measure for Dalits in which the community constructs a moral space for each individual to regain the lost robust self. Further, the individual and the community are seen as reciprocal to each other because any positive amelioration in social, cultural and political milieu will compliment the progress of both.

In both these approaches three elements are common. First, they accept religion as the main domain to deliberate over the issue of conversion. Secondly, they judge the impact of conversion on social and cultural spheres. Thirdly, 'ethics' and 'morality' of a religious community are judged in accordance with the doctrine of universal brotherhood. The methods adopted in both the approaches are politico-sociological in nature although they are critical of each other in advancing overcharged judgments.

In the previous two chapters, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was contextualized as a political agency in developing an alternative political framework against the existing ideological discourses. Secondly, by situating it in the discourse of secular state, attempts were made to construct a 'new-self' identity of Dalits as modern citizens. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to contextualize the impact of conversion movement over Mahars in Maharashtra as this was the community which whole heartedly heeded to Ambedkar's call for conversion in 1956.[118] The Mahar Movement in Maharashtra needs a special acknowledgement here because this is the only community which has been fore bearing the spirit of Ambedkar's struggle till date. Endorsing the views of the 'second' school that conversion of Mahars in Maharashtra has created rapid awareness within the community, we are undertaking a study of the 'difference' created by it. Mahar's Buddhist conversion symbolizes a radical departure from their past to build a conscious and collective community. Under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, the collective progress of Mahars was radical

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[117]Gauri Vishvanathan, *Outside the Fold*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 211-239
[118]Marika Vicziany and Mendelsohn Oliver, *The Untouchables*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p. 116

and emancipatory in nature, different from the ideal set by early Mahar Movement in Maharashtra. Their rejection of Hinduism for a better humane world and refuge to Buddhism, created a modern collective-community and the growing subaltern religious consciousness among the oppressed. An argument is advanced here that the post Ambedkar Dalit Movement in Maharashtra is an outcome of such an ideological milieu created by Buddhist conversion.

The Early Mahar Movement in Maharashtra

Eleanor Zelliot in her study referred to the Mahar community as the main actor in building the Dalit Movement in Maharashtra. She regards the two Bhakti saints Chokahmela, Eknath and the Mahar and Non-Brahman Movement of nineteenth century in Maharashtra as the predecessors to Ambedkar's movement.[119] Compared to any other Dalit caste in Maharashtra, the Mahars from the initiation of reformist movement showed an important involvement in countering the hegemony of Brahmanism. Ambedkar started his political movement in 1919 by giving testimony before the Southborough Committee which replicated the activism of early social activists of Mahar community. Gopal Baba Walangkar in 1890 and Shivram Janaba Kamble in 1910 were among the first to write petitions to the British Government pleading for the re-establishment of Mahar enlistment in the army.[120] In 1903 under the leadership of Bahadur Gangaram Krishnaji the first conference of Mahars was held in Pune. Gopal Baba Walangkar is also regarded as the first person to start a Mahar newspaper, *Vital Vidhvansak*, aimed at untouchables, retracing their glorious past and disparaging the upper castes.[121] Thus, even before the entry of Ambedkar in the socio-political sphere at Maharashtra, the ambiance created by early Mahar Movement was vibrant, motivated and progressive towards social change.

To articulate such a sudden and radical step towards future through political measures was unimaginable for them earlier. The impetus to this motivation in their

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[119]Eleanor Zelliot. *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, p. 10
[120]ibid. p. 36
[121]Robert Deliege. *The Untouchables of India*, Berg Publishers, New York, 1999. p. 176

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social behavior was provided by their changed economic conditions brought by colonial capitalism. The newly acquired social and economic status created a small but effective intellectual milieu among Dalits. In search for meaningful social existence they came across direct opposition to the dominant Brahmanic religious authority and started rejecting their traditional 'impure' occupations.

> The railway centers and the mill towns, as well as Bombay, Pune and Nagpur, became the loci for a new Mahar push for education and improved social status. Major consequences followed such exposure. Stimulated through contact with city relatives or to the traveling Mahar propagandist and entertainers, the Mahars remaining in the villages began to discard both duties and caste practices that were associated with their low status: the dragging out of carcasses and the subsequent eating of carrion, begging for food, wearing the cloths of dead.[122]

Mahar has been the most prominent Dalit community in Maharashtra, constituting about nine per cent of the state population.[123] They form a minority in almost every village. Their quarters, called the *Maharwada*, are usually set apart in the east of the village. The traditional Mahars were village watchmen, and performed numerous services for higher castes. Their duties also included arbitrating in boundary disputes, mending the village wall, serving as guide and messenger to government servants, calling landowners to pay land revenue at the village *chaudi* (village hall), sweeping the village roads, escorting the government treasury, tracking thieves, carrying death notice and messages to other villages, bringing fuel to the cremation ground, and removing the carcasses of dead cattle from the village.[124] Numerous such jobs were hereditarily attached to Mahars and were called as '*Maharwatan*' - an entitlement to a small quantity of grain or a fragment of land traditionally given to them for rendering a variety of services to the village. This system of perpetual slavery was also legislated by the colonial government in

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[122]Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar. New Delhi, 2001, p. 89
[123]G. G. Wankhede, "Educational inequalities among Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra" *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 5, 2001
[124]Alexander Robertson, *The Mahar Folk, A study of Untouchables in Maharashtra*, Oxford University Press, London, 1938. pp. 23-24

Bombay Hereditary Act, 1874.[125] Their social position was degrading and inferior because of the *impure* nature of the duties they performed. A Mahar performed his duty in the context of untouchability; his touch was polluting and did not come into direct contact with caste Hindus. To resist the orders was out of question because the duties of Mahar were hereditarily attached to them and in a village the forces of production were governed by caste system. Dr. Ambedkar argued that Mahars could not hope for self-reliance and an improved life as long as they continued to depend on *watan*.

As noted above, with the advent of British rule in India, the Mahars were exposed to many new economic opportunities. They separated themselves from their traditional duties of serving the upper castes and started working in new areas created by the British State. From 1860 onwards the Mahar presence, as manual and skilled laborers, was seen on the docks, the railways, in road construction, in textile mills, and in government industries such as ammunition factories.[126] The avenues of economic progress led them to demand equal social status in their public life. They were obviously not content with their untouchable status and demanded redress of their grievances. Early in 1890, Walangkar in his petition to the Shankaracharya and other Hindu leaders listed the following disadvantages of his community:

> Difficulty in getting education, exclusion from *dharmashalas* (pilgrims' and travelers' guest houses), discrimination while traveling, ban on participation in trade, social stigma even when army service pay might allow the Untouchables to better their conditions, revulsion towards the Untouchables because of their handling of dead cattle.[127]

Along with such demands the neo-elites among Mahars used several other forms of justification to state their claims for equal social status. Firstly, they claimed themselves as 'Kshatriya' because of their military lineage during Maratha regime

[125]Naito Masao, "Anti-Untouchability Ideologies and Movements in Maharashtra From the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1930s" in H. KOTANI (Ed) *Caste System, Untouchability and The Depressed*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1997

[126]Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, p. 89

[127]Quoted in Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, p. 38

and in the British army. Secondly, aligned with Phule's articulation they also involved themselves in constructing their separate identity on the lines of pre-Aryan "lords of the land" claim. However, both these claims do not get sufficient legitimization in Mahar Movement because both the claims emphasized a distinguished presence in Hindu community. It gave room to direct opposition from the other strata of society. In an atmosphere where the process of social reformism was carried out by non-Brahmanic movements and other religious reformers, any radical departure could have been seen as antagonistic to the process of social change.

Barring any direct opposition to caste Hindus, Mahars started following more humanistic and moral grounds. They adopted higher caste's ritual practices like participating in public worship of Hindu deities (Sanskritization). The religious right to gain temple entry also became one of the main issues in the claim for equal status. Many influential Mahar leaders 'for increased participation in higher form of Hinduism' joined the *Prarthna Samaj* in 1910. Many of the military Mahars also joined the *Kabir* and *Ramanandi Panths*, the religious sects which stressed equality. The work and name of the fourteenth century poet-saint *Chokhamela* was used to gain status by citing his humanitarian and religious songs. More than upper *Varna* status, they emphasized on equality and fraternity in social relationships.

> The nineteenth century claim that the Mahar was of Kshatriya Status
> was dropped in the twentieth century, replaced by the claim that the
> Mahar was of worth simply as human being.[128]

It demonstrates a sympathetic tone towards Hindu religion and a positive belief in the process of religious reforms carried out by the upper caste Hindus. The reason for such an easy surrender could be the lack of any other alternative ideas. Political mobilizations and deliberations with ruling authority as the tools for social change were adopted only after the advent of Dr. Ambedkar in Mahar socio-political life. Till that time the sphere of religion was seen as possible arena to bring social change. The early Mahar Movement created a passive consciousness within the

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[128]Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, p. 94

community by generating a hope about possible reforms in Hindu religion and with their demand for equal social status. Prof. Gopal Guru perceives this process of emulation and Sanskritization as contributory 'to the development of negative consciousnesses.[129] It also demonstrates a philosophical understanding about the ideals and principles of 'true' religion. Equality among followers and a dignified life became the two necessary elements of religious doctrine. Ambedkar in his initial years of activism adopted the same inert mode of protest, but soon realized that fighting Brahmanism inside the domain of Hinduism is impossible because untouchability is its inherent feature. He concluded that conversion is the inevitable passage for a better future.

Mahar movement under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar saw a radical shift from the motives of religious reforms and Sanskritization. He criticized the dogmatic religiosity of Hinduism with the arguments based on modern democratic values and rationality. His proposed alternatives essentialized human dignity, self respect, fraternity and rational outlook as the main components of modern religion. These aspirations have a valuable support only in the doctrine of Buddha Dhamma. Ambedkar transformed the objectives of early Mahar Movement by attacking the symbols of social and religious authority of Hinduism. To transform the social system towards equality and brotherhood he motivated the Dalit community to leave Hinduism.

Dalits and Religion: Creating Alternative Theology

Religion, in the sense of 'spiritual principles', truly 'universal', is applicable to all times, to all countries and to all races.

-Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar

As discussed above, Ambedkar used the instrument of religion as the mode of protest for social mobility of Dalits. The earlier modes of passive resistance by

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[129]Gopal Guru, "The Dalit Movement in Mainstream Sociology", in S.M. Michael (Ed) *Dalits in Modern India*, Vistar Publications, New Delhi 1999. p. 137

Dalits were opposed as they echoed the positions of caste Hindu reformists. He tried to develop a coherent view on the nature of religion and its relation to politics and power. Caste is fundamentally 'a state of mind' which is systematized by religious scriptures and traditions. Untouchability is also based on same caste ideology and its very presence defines the hierarchical caste system in social life of every Hindu. Therefore any attempt for the betterment of servile class in Hinduism should practically lead to the destruction of religious notions on which caste is founded. In his 'Annihilation of Caste' written in 1936, Ambedkar made this concrete assessment on the nature of Hindu religion. He suggested that "the real remedy for breaking caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste."[130] Ambedkar's proposed solution was impractical as it too, depended largely upon the wish and acceptability of the individual and the family of two different caste groups. Secondly, exogamy does not provide any ideological base to counter the social problems existing in society, as marital relations are usually based on the cordiality of emotions and material gains. Engels argued that this form of both marriage and the family developed to solve the problem of the inheritance of private property.[131] Further this symbolized a solitary attempt of an individual towards liberation, whose affect possibly could not be recognized. Therefore, more than adopting such a prolonged map for social change Ambedkar in his successive years undermined every other effort of social reformism and developed a theoretical perspective demonstrating the need of a moral religion prioritizing liberation of the whole of the Dalit community.

Ambedkar in all of his writings maintained the necessity of religion in public life for social and spiritual unity. According to him, Hinduism is 'religion of rules' and it tends to deprive moral life of freedom and spontaneity and reduces it to more or less anxious and servile conformity to externally imposed rules.[132] Ambedkar has given four characteristics of religion:

(1) "Religion in the sense of morality must, therefore, remain the governing

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[130]B.R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste" in Vasant Moon (compiler) Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979, p.67.

[131]F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and State*, Progress Publishers, Moscow,1977, pp. 40-43

[132]B.R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste" in Vasant Moon (compiler) Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979.

principle in every society.

(2)   Religion if it is to function must be in accord with reason which is merely another name of science.

(3)   Its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Unless a religion recognizes these three fundamental principles of social life, religion will be doomed.

(4)   Religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty."[133]

From the above notions of Ambedkar it could be deduced that the Hindu religion does not have any space for morality, reason and fraternal values. Hinduism codifies the social system involving thousands of castes which do not allow any individual to disregard ones 'original' identity and his/her duty pertaining to the society. Dalits are the worst affected social group because of their degraded position in social mechanism which has led them to a kind of permanent slavery. Conversion to Buddhism as Ambedkar understood it, was to bestow upon the untouchables the freedom from social bondage, economic advancement and progress. This new strategy assures that "Conversion is the only means by which the Mahar may achieve freedom and equality".[134] Conversion would create a collective social identity, common culture and a modern theological perspective among Dalits. The following typology is developed to make sense of Ambedkar's conversion strategy.

- <u>Making of a collective-community</u>

The present Dalit community represents a broad socio-political identity of numerous lower caste groups committed to combat dehumanized nature of caste oppression. The avowed objectives of Dalit movement are the unification of 'all the oppressed groups, namely the scheduled castes, the tribes, the workers, landless laborers, small farmers and other poor'[135] and to promote alternative modes of social progress based on caste ideology. It tried to create a homogenous identity of the

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[133]B.R. Ambedkar, *Buddha and the Future of His Religion*, Paras, Nagpur, 1991, p. 88

[134]This is one of the resolutions passed in the meeting of Mahars in May 1936 at Bombay.

[135]S.M. Michale, "Dalit Vision of a Just Society in India", in S.M. Michale (Ed) *Dalits in Modern India*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi 1999, p. 99

whole of the servile class in India based on the dichotomy of exploited and exploiters. Caste exploitation was seen as the common element between the culturally diversified and regionally segregated Dalit masses and so annihilation of the whole system became the movement's main goal. A collective community in this respect means an ideological assertion of every conscious individual of the community for their progressive development as a citizen in a uniform way. Equal rights, representation, and dignified social identity became the leading arguments to unite the heterogeneous castes for a collective demonstration in public life.

Jyotiba Phule was the first Indian who consciously sought to bring together major peasant castes along with large number of untouchables to form a common 'front' against Brahmin domination.[136] His 'Satyashodhak Samaj' (Truth Seeking Society) promoted the interest and common culture of all lower castes against the historical and cultural adversaries of Brahmins. Phule wanted to convert the diversified lower caste community into an upsurge of all non-brahmanic forces, without actually giving them the 'feel' of collective community, as he failed to propose an identity without a caste prefix. However, the lack of any solid historical account to support his practical journey of 're-mythological' model was one of the major drawbacks. Secondly, even after targeting Brahmanic deities for irrationality and superstitions, Phule in his 'Samaj' mentioned the need of a God.[137] Ambedkar endorsed some of Phule's observations but pursued his own interpretation of Indian History showing the Untouchables as ex-Buddhists and denouncing any role of God in his 'spiritual' teachings.

Ambedkar was highly inspired and motivated by the revolutionary works of Jyotiba Phule. Contextualizing himself in the contemporary political development of India he sought to attack two important notions - culturally enforced inequality and economic inequality perpetuated by Hinduism. Firstly, he tried to develop a common secular state identity of depressed castes to avail the benefits of modern nation-State. Secondly, he thought of religious revolutions - one which will not only destroy the

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[136]Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Vision*, Orient Longman limited, 1995, p. 19
[137]Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 1994, p. 243

degraded, impure untouchable identity but also build a positive, robust moral identity among every Dalit. Concerning the identity of Dalits, Ambedkar's religious conversion to Buddhism in the last phase of his leadership could be seen as an attempt to propose an identity, which would surpass or merge the different fragmented identities into a most comprehensive, scientific and revolutionary project for a collective assertion of Dalit masses.

With a Mahar identity the whole community had to face caste atrocities irrespective of their economic conditions and intellectual superiority. As a member of Hindu society, every Mahar was looked down upon as impure, untouchable, one with a *dehuman* presence. In his life it was impossible to avoid the duties destined to a particular caste. The only mode for liberty from this condition as prescribed by Hindu religious texts is 'Rebirth'. Ambedkar envisaged that a Buddhist identity provides the most comprehensive, scientific and rational model for the emancipation of the untouchables. It enables them not only to fight Brahminical values but it also in a way reinvents the history and culture of their past. The cultural capital of Buddhism is used to demarcate the modern Dalit from the domination of Hindu culture. Ambedkar observed that since ancient times Buddhism was the sole religion, which succeeded in defeating Brahmanism because of its moral teachings and had created a conscious community sans caste discrimination.[138] The Buddhist thoughts are based on rationality and morality, which is helpful in making a powerful religious ideology to fight superstitions, dogmas and prejudice present in our society.

> In Buddhism, he (Ambedkar) discovered a ray of hope and light for all communities. He contended that Buddha sought to raise the social status of the servile classes and he believed in the necessity and urgency of social and religious reforms which the poor, fallen and the weak needed. The creed of Buddha was not only a protest, but a challenge to the whole Hindu society.[139]

[138]M. S. Gore. "The Rise and Fall of Buddhism in India: Two perspectives", *The Indian Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, no. 2, April-June 1991
[139]W.N. Kuber. *Ambedkar a Critical Study*. PPH. New Delhi.1991, p. 96

Secondly, the Social Reformers also questioned the spiritual authority of Brahminical texts in the light of reason and espoused rationalism. Religion should not become dogmatic, rather should essentially be based on morality. Ambedkar like a true inheritor of this intellectual legacy tried to comprehend it by following the same path of rationality and reason. He envisaged that the sensitive realization of all such rationalist and egalitarian thoughts lie only in the teachings of Buddha. Buddhism provided a correct and justified platform to the concerns of the Renaissance Movement. Thus, Ambedkar's conversion was a concluding remark to the ongoing process of social reformism towards the formation of a collective community.

- ## Cultural Revolution

The Hindu societal culture is antagonist to cohesive and cooperative character of society. In other religious societies the culture represents a way of the life of its members. It is a 'design for living' held by particular society. Since man has no instincts to direct his actions, his behavior must be based on guidelines which are learned. In order for a society to operate effectively these guidelines must be shared by its members. Without shared culture, members of the society would be unable to communicate and cooperate. The caste system dictates rules which do not allow the members of same community to interact with each other. Their separate living ghettos create cultural variants based on local considerations. In social sciences these variants are understood as diversified cultures and differentiated within the dichotomy of 'Great' and 'Little' cultures. The Brahminical 'Great' culture operated in community as a yardstick for other cultural traditions. This cultural domination strengthens the value of caste hierarchy and creates a communal-patriarchal social system.

Kancha Ilaih is part of a broader tradition or set of Phule-Ambedkar-Periyar traditions who has put forth alternative interpretations of Indian identities, cultures and religions. Through this perspective Indian Culture has been seen as imagination or constructed phenomenon of Indian elites to systematize superstitions, hierarchy and caste exploitation which is intrinsic to Hinduism. This broad homogenization under the aegis of Hindu nationalism has acquired a cultural hegemony in India. Dalit

interpretation of Indian culture attacked the Hindu notion of 'great tradition' and engaged itself within the discourse of reinventing alternative non-Hindu perspectives of culture and tradition. It also presents a possible perspective on what would be the driving forces to constitute a future Indian society of a democratic and equalitarian fashion.[140]

> The first premise of our epistemology is the affirmation of the potential of 'our own selfhood' and the comparison of this self with the self of the other. In this process we will lay the foundation for a trans-formation of the caste-cultural consciousness that is the very source of inequality in India. The Aim is to negate all factors of negation- Hinduism, Brahmanism, Feudalism and Capitalism.[141]

Ambedkar was the first historian who presented a detailed explanation of Dalit's presence in history.[142] He pointed out two important facts in his study of ancient Hindu society. One, there was no common bond or common culture in India and the inhabitants of this land represented a mixed race and that the different caste groups are not based on racial distinction. Secondly, the chronology of ancient India is divided into three major phases, i.e. (1) Brahmanism (the Vedic Period, tribal in nature and characterized by *Varna* among the Vedic Aryans, though this was not based on birth), (2) The 'revolutionary' period of Buddhism, marked by the rise of Magadha and Mauryan states and which brought about a great advance in the status of women and the Shudhra, whose position had become degraded in the last stages of the Vedic Period, and (3) the "counter-revolutionary" period of Hinduism marked by the Manusmriti, the transformation of *Varna* into caste, and the complete downgrading of Shudhra and women.[143] Ambedkar observed that only Buddhism succeeded in advancing an alternative to the Brahminical culture as it suggested a different perspective to construct the society on more rational and moral values, radically different from the contemporary social order. Buddhism succeeded in

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[140]Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*. Sage Publication, New Delhi, p. 241

[141]Kancha Ilaih, "Productive Labour, Consciousness and History", *Subaltern Studies IX*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2003. p. 167

[142]Kanwal Bharti, *Dalit Vimarsh Ki Bhumika*, ItihasBodh Prakashan, Allahabad. 2002. p. 27

[143]Ambedkar, B.R., "Annihilation of Caste" in Vasant Moon (compiler) *Dr. Bahasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979. pp. 419-20

establishing an egalitarian society denouncing the divine authority of *Vedas, Shrutis* and *Smritis*. It preached non-violence and a moral conduct of life. Conversion to Buddhism radicalizes the nature of 'local' community culture into the culture of protest and liberation from the dominant 'great culture'.

The post-conversion decades represent the collective churning of the subaltern masses for the making of an alternative Buddhist culture based on simple rituals and religious observations having limited importance in the daily life of its adherents.[144] Ambedkar by contesting the 'fundamentally ritualistic system' of Hinduism, in 'Buddha and his Dhamma' asked the new followers of Buddhist doctrine to surrender themselves only to *Buddha, Dhamma* and *Sangha* as only these *three gems* can inspire them to walk on the path of removal of sufferings.[145] Pertaining to the 'canonical' order of Ambedkar the converted community has condemned worship of supernatural deities and orthodox belief in *Karma* theory and has started observing The Buddha and Ambedkar as the new 'Enlightened' idols. The collective-community has invented new festivals, calendars, cultural symbols, worshipping places, socio-cultural organisations, literature, songs, dress codes, etc. to establish their autonomous presence in the socio-cultural and religious milieu. The re-construction of cultural symbols demonstrates their breakup from the conservative Hindu culture based on inhuman and unethical values.

The predominant cultural distinction among various castes based on rituals, customs and habits is the natural product of rooted traditional orthodox values perpetuated by caste system in the Indian society. Due to caste system it has limited space to characterize itself as an autonomous unit of Indian culture. Hindu religion is constructed as the common determining factor for all the existing cultures by valuing the 'difference' with a positive connotation. A meta-narrative of "Unity in Diversity" thus occupied a space to exclude the voices of the opposition. This false 'cultural commonality' was instrumentalized by the Hindu elites to propagate their mythical

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[144]T. Fitzgerald, "Ritual Politics and Soteriology in Ambedkar Buddhism" in D. C. Ahir's *Buddhism in India after Ambedkar*, Blumoom Books, New Delhi. 2003, p.115
[145]Shyam Tagade, *Buddha Dhamma Mission of Buddhisatta Ambedkar*, Pradnya Maitri Pratisthan, Nagpur, 2004, p. 493

idea of 'One Nation, One Religion, and One Culture'. The adaptation of Buddhist rituals, culture and traditions by a community not only counters this broader, universal 'Hindutva' characterization of Indian culture as unified but also nurtures an ancient, marginalized and dispossessed culture with a new meaning. This move demonstrates a conscious effort of subaltern masses to distinguish them from the monopoly of hegemonic Brahmanic ideology.

- ## Morality and Emancipation

> The religion of the Buddha is morality. It is imbedded in religion. Buddhist religion is nothing if not morality. It is true that in Buddhism there is no God. In place of God there is morality. What god is to other religion morality is to Buddhism.[146]

Theology is 'the ordering of a system of ideas based upon beliefs about the revelation of God',[147] it also says that 'revelation is filtered through human experience, which is limited by social realities'[148]. Morality in general denotes what is 'wrong' or 'right' and is separate from the domain of religion. To be a moral agent is to be an autonomous or self directed agent.[149] Morality demands ethical judgment and is emotive in character. On the other hand, theology based on the belief in God, demands a total and unqualified commitment to obey His commands. Religious belief provides believers with their own standard for evaluating actions, which happens to be different from, and may be even opposed to, a moral one. Religious theology does not support any conflict between the *right* religion and *right* moral thinking because of its faith in transcendental values. For example, untouchability according to Hinduism is seen as 'perfectly good' and a part of a Hindu's socio-religious customs. When the practitioner of untouchability talks about his act, what he generally refers to is actually doing the 'will of God' which is like observing the dictums of caste system. Hindu theology in particular is

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[146]B.R. Ambedkar, *Buddha and the Future of His Religion*, Paras, Nagpur 1991 p. 5
[147]Brian Davis, *Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press, London, 2000 p. 631
[148]Ibid
[149]James Rachels, "God and Human Attitude", *Religious Studies- 7*, 1971, p. 34

antithetic to moral theology because it gives only a set of rules according to one's caste and does not oppose exploitation of one caste by another as an innate principle or religious duty. Yashwant Sumant noted that the historical absence of morality in Hindu religious doctrine made Hinduism a 'religion of rules'.

> It was only at some stage of historical development that religions came to replace morality by identifying itself with morality, and it is at this juncture that religion appears to play a positive and emancipatory role in the histories of different communities. But once it is divorced from morality, it no more plays a positive role n society. It becomes corrupt and exploitative. It becomes oppressive. It remains only as dogma, defying critical reason. It becomes only a set of rules, devoid of principles.[150]

Ambedkar scrutinized all major religions from the point of view of morality and identified only Buddhism as the true inheritor of morality, righteousness and truth. Conversion to Buddhism has given 'liberation theology' to Dalits to reinterpret their role in public and private affairs. It calls for employing reason and scientific temperament to understand the degraded and impure local status of untouchables in India. By positioning morality as the main principle of social consciousness and community living, Ambedkar unveiled the weakness of Hindu religion in providing the same spirit. Buddha Dhamma condemned belief in God, belief in soul, belief in sacrifice, in the infallibility of books,[151] which are the basic components of Hindu theology. In Buddha Dhamma the promotion of liberty, equality and fraternity is held as praxis to create a moral and liberative social order which is distinct from the Hindu caste order and praxis. Such a conception puts justice and establishment of moral order at the centre of study in lieu of doctrinal religious orthodoxy and belief in transcendental values such as God.

Conversion to Buddhism offers a rational path to emancipate the Dalit masses from the clutches of Brahminical social order. The philosophical

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[150]Yashwant Sumant, "Situating Religion in Ambedkar's Political Discourse" in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (Ed) *Reconstructing the World. B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*. Oxford University Press, 2004. p. 70
[151]B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*. Buddha Bhoomi Publication, Nagpur, pp. 215-221

manifestation of Buddha's doctrine, counter to the 'God' centered theology of Hinduism generates a kind of moral theology for the emancipation of Dalits in India. Thus 'Liberation Theology' for Dalits meant a comprehensive study of religion as a social force for a collective community to realize their socio-political life. It has a powerful impact in constructing a modern alternative set of religious ethos and a positive identity. Gail Omvedt in her study observed:

> With the conversion to Buddhism Ambedkar achieved what Phule and Periyar, for all their resistance to Hinduism had failed to achieve: making a conscious non-Hindu identity a collective material and radicalizing force in India.[152]

Neo-Buddhist: A Movement of Counter Culture

> It is your responsibility to safeguard the identity of Buddha Dhamma in actual practice. If you do not shoulder this responsibility successfully, your opponents will be free to comment that Mahar and Mangs have brought disrepute to Buddha Dhamma and they will be blamed for that. I hope that this tide of *Buddha Dhamma Deeksha* will reach the entire country and India will become the land of Buddha.[153]

-Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar

In the discourse over conversion movement in India, Maharashtra has remained the central point of reference because of the celebrated Ambedkar's 'Buddhist conversion' in 1956. In Maharashtra almost every Buddhist belongs to the former Mahar caste and in India more than ninety per cent of Buddhists are ex-Mahars.[154] Many of the social scientists use Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit, as synonymous to each other, yet argue that the semantic fields of the terms are

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[152]Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2004, p. 249

[153]Quoted from Shyam Tagade, *Buddha Dhamma Mission of Buddhisatta Ambedkar*, Pradnya Maitri Pratisthan, Nagpur, 2004, p. 587

[154]D. C. Ahir, *Buddhism in India after Dr. Ambedkar (1956-2002)*, Blumoon Books, New Delhi, 2003, p. 42

distinct.[155] It is not only because of Mahars' unqualified participation in conversion movement that led to this categorization but the fact that they were at the forefront in radicalizing the Dalit Movement in India and were an important part of the broader struggle against Brahminical caste system. Vasant Moon in his autobiography sharply described the Dalit movement as 'Mahar movement'.[156] Moreover, the political activism of Mahars, through Republican Party of India (RPI) and other such political outfits too made them influential in the political arena of Maharashtra. It is often said that Mahars claim the highest status among the Dalit castes in Maharashtra because of their dominant role in bringing about social change. The other Dalit castes in Maharashtra (Chambhars and Matangs) remained attached to their old traditions and professions and continue to observe Hinduism as their religion. Even before Ambedkar's entry into the political milieu of Maharashtra, the Mahar movement had demonstrated their intellectual and creative ability in giving shape to Dalit struggle. Further, in recent history, the Mahar caste by embracing Buddhism has generated a positive identity, created a new system of social mobility and mode of cultural assertion among them which is distinct from any Dalit caste in India.

We have articulated a positive theoretical perspective to study the impact of Ambedkar's Buddhist conversion. A practical reflection of this development can be seen in the neo-Buddhist movement in Maharashtra. Mahars as the main actors of this process contributed the most to materialize the dreams of Dr. Ambedkar. The collective religio-cultural system built by Mahars in Maharashtra in the last forty years forms the base for modern Dalit movement to argue for an alternative socio-cultural and political system.

This theoretical perspective in the mainstream discourse on the impact of conversion has remained in the sphere of varied contestations. It has been contested by many social scientists that it is not possible to build a homogenous Buddhist

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[155]Johannes Beltz, "Contesting Caste, Hierarchy, and Hinduism" in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (Eds), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India,* Oxford University Press, 2004, New Delhi, p. 246
[156]See Vasant Moon, *A Dalit Autobiography,* Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2001

identity or culture as there are no common factors to emphasis upon. Robert Deliege feels that among Dalits there is a big majority which does not look at conversion as a remedy to social change but see their salvation in integrating within wider Indian society.[157] Regarding the Buddhist conversion it has been argued that the class based distinctions among the Mahar community produced two variants of caste compositions, the Hindu Mahars and Buddhist Mahars. Neera Burra in her case study sees this difference in urban-rural dichotomy and finds illiteracy and poverty as the main reasons for the rural Mahar's attachment with old Hindu traditions and rituals.[158] Further, Ravindra Patil in his study argued that the assimilation of newly formed Mahar middle class in the process of sanskritization is also a responsible factor which differentiate Mahars into *sanskratize* Mahars and converted Buddhists.[159] Both the researchers have identified the presence of hierarchical classes as the main hurdle in the making of common cultural identity. Rama Tambe in her study on Marathwada Buddhists also analyses on the same lines. She argues that conversion instead of producing a new identity threw up a conflicted and contested dual identity. The old untouchable Hindu caste identity under the influence of 'integration' thesis is competing for primacy in the public domain against the new autonomous Buddhist identity. She argues that inner domain (private) is still governed by a Hindu religious psyche which leads to a lopsided assertion among the members of the community, showing the unbreakable bond of Mahars with the Hindu customs and rituals.[160]

The above mentioned case studies on the Mahar conversion give us an insight which presents a picture which is different from the ideal theoretical perspectives envisaged by Ambedkar. The local socio-cultural differences presented by these studies locate the converted Mahars on a comparative scale with the 'ideal Buddhism'. Further, studying the impact of conversion through a class perspective would miss the main point of reference on which the movement has

[157]Robert Deliege, *The Untouchables of India*, Berg, New York, 1999, pp. 164-174

[158]Neera Burra, "Buddhism, Conversion and Identity: A case Study of Village Mahars" in M.N. Srinivas (Ed) *Caste its Twentieth Century Avatar*, Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 152-173

[159]Ravindra Patil, "Search for Identity among Dalit Middle Class in Maharashtra", *Social Action*, January-March 2000, vol-50.

[160]Rama Tambe, *Dalit identity, Conversion and Neo-Buddhists: Past and Present*, PWS Publications, Nagpur, 1994

come above. Every class develops a peculiar character conducive for its materialist growth which reflects in their socio-cultural outlook. Conversion on other hand makes social and cultural elements prime to see the developments of the practical world. Therefore, such distinctions do not describe the realities. The 'change' should be studied in comparison to other Dalit castes which rejected the mode of conversion and are still attached with Hinduism. The collective discourse of neo-Buddhist community in comparison with the non converted Dalit communities will demonstrate the radical change conversion has brought up.

The rise of Mahars as new religious identity has a wider impact on the socio-political and cultural domain of Maharashtra. The process of conversion is an ongoing struggle against Hindu caste system, dominant culture and Brahmanic rituals. The last forty years is a small period of time to pass a concrete judgment on this issue. The new 'Bouddha' identity, public culture and the construction of new theistic religion based on morality has transformed the Mahar community into collective intellectuals struggling against Hinduism. No other Dalit caste in Maharashtra or in India has demonstrated such a radical churning in their attempt to break with Hindu caste system. The following typology is an undertaking to register the neo-Buddhist movement as an active progression to actualize the theoretical perspectives which developed in the previous section of this chapter.

* Nav-Bouddha:

Throughout Maharashtra one could witness same kind of testimonies from the converted Mahars.

> I have accepted the Buddhist Dhamma. I am a Buddhist now. I am not a Mahar, nor an untouchable nor even a Hindu. I have become a human being. I am now equal with high caste Hindus. I am equal with all. I am not lowborn or inferior now.[161]

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[161] Prakah Kharat, "Constructing a Meaning of Navyana Buddhism", *Ambedkarvad*, Nagpur, October-November 1998.

Conversion brought to Mahars a new self-esteem and an acute sense of separate identity. They rejected their Hindu identity and started calling themselves 'Bouddha'. As a conscious community and to respect the regained Buddhist identity they made certain definite breaks with the traditional system. T. Fitzgerald in his research in Parbhani district of Maharashtra suggests that Mahars have conspicuously rejected to participate in traditional village services like clearing the dead animals.[162] The Buddhists have been victims of atrocities as a result of their refusal to perform these polluting duties.[163] Despite these pressures the Buddhists have generally refused to perform these duties. However the other Dalit castes like *Mang, Dhor* and *Holar* have continued to perform their respective traditional polluting jobs without any opposition. Ambedkar was critical of Hinduism because of its compartmentalized labor system which does not allow the lower castes to operate as a free labor. Sticking to traditional caste duties by non-Mahar Dalit castes showed their reluctance in breaking the caste system. To assert their democratic rights non-Mahar Dalit castes use other social and political means which operates into the Hindu hierarchy. On the other hand Buddhism has provided Mahars a tool to argue for equal treatment and self-respect rather than opting for sole political alternative. This collective assertion of Mahars certainly takes overboard individual liberation and endorses Ambedkar's doctrine that in the modern world priority must be the institutional liberation of the whole *Samaj*.

Christophe Jaffrelot in a recent study on Ambedkar refers to two surveys conducted in Pune with a break of thirty years that reveal conversion has overcome caste barriers and that the neo-Buddhists mixed freely with upper caste people socially – including marriage and eating together on occasions. At the same time he observes that conversion has brought 'mixed results'. The Mahars have a changed 'Bouddha' identity but this move was only slowly and partially reflected in the emergence of a new collective identity. He fails to observe that Bouddha as a collective identity has developed a competent identity within and outside the Hindu

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[162]T. Fitzgerald, "Ritual, Politics and Soteriology in Ambedkar Buddhism", in D.C Ahir, *Buddhism in India after Dr. Ambedkar (1956-2002)*, Blumoon Books, New Delhi, 2003, p. 42
[163]ibid

caste system. The neo-Buddhists are competing with the caste Hindus for an equal status in public space and on the other hand they question the position of other Dalit castes which are still living in the fold of Hinduism. Under such a milieu neo-Buddhists have created alternative conceptions about community-living based on the doctrine of *Buddha Dhamma*.

The neo-Buddhist population in India has crossed eight million in the recently conducted population survey by Government of India.[164] In Maharashtra the Buddhist population comprises 6.39 per cent of the total population which is widely dispersed throughout the state but concentrated especially in Marathwada and Vidarbha regions.[165] Due to their regional, educational and economic disparities it is obvious that there are differences in the pursuance of a common culture or communitarian ethos. An attempt to present the internal discourse of Bouddha community as merely conflicting and ambiguous would be resulted in lodging an attack on the collective commitment of the whole Bouddha community in combating the cultural and religious domination of Hinduism. The negative remarks underestimate the radical paradigm shift in the nature of Mahars psychological and social vision. Zelliot who has looked upon the movement of conversion as a liberation struggle of lower castes, strikes a positive note:

> What has happened is that even in the areas where observers report 'no change at all', one finds that Buddhist no longer carry out what they feel are ritually submissive, degrading, or impure duties; that some young people, far more than in other Untouchable and backward communities, become educated; and that Buddhists do not participate in the Hindu public practices so long denied to them, not now out of prohibition but out of a sense of separateness.[166]

The cohesive and cooperative character of Buddhist community is a visible fact. The old despised Mahar community has endowed itself with new legitimacy, both

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[164]Census of India 2001, Government of India.

[165]K. Jamanadas, *Some Self Introspection on Future of Buddhism* on www.Ambedkar.org, as on 11 May 2005

[166]Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, p. 241

as descendants of a glorious tradition of Buddhism and as its current representatives. The collective Bouddha community symbolized 'a unity of discourse' in their progressive march towards a society based on social justice and harmony. In this process they are obstructed by the remnants of Brahminical culture within the community. The total suppression of these old customs and ritual duties is possible only by creating greater consciousness regarding the collective commitments of the Bouddha community in destroying Brahminical caste values within the community. The collective Buddhist community is progressing confidently to achieve the objectives envisaged by Dr. Ambedkar.

- ## Pali-ization:

Dr. Ambedkar was an ardent critique of Hindu ritualism ranging from worship of the supernatural to exorcism, caste ritualism such as endogamy and dowry, or rituals of purity and pollution. He envisaged a modern Buddhism with minimal show of rituals and practices in community life. He himself advocated some simple Buddhist rituals such as *puja at* wedding and funerals.[167] More than arguing for the development of a cultural alternative he believed in shared moral values of community based on *Prajna* (reason) and *Karuna* (consideration) towards others.[168] This notion does not reject the functional importance of rituals and other cultural elements in the domain of religious behavior. As a counter culture the Bouddha community in the last forty years has developed a broader alternative tradition of religious rituals and practices. Conversion to Buddhism insists on rejection of Hindu past and proposes a new set of social and cultural values to be observed. In calling for adherence to new values of the religious doctrine, the cultural and traditional alternative developed by Bouddha community reflects a radical break from Hinduism. This mechanism to promote their indigenous socio-cultural system for regaining the lost social status is different from the process of Sanskritization. Zelliot defines this process as 'Pali-ization'[169], a notion built on the

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[167]B.R. Ambedkar, *Bouddha Puja-Path*, Sugat Prakashan, Nagpur, 2002, pp. 9-12
[168]Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism*, Windhorse Publications, 1986. p. 155
[169]Neera Burra. "Buddhism, Conversion and Identity: A case Study of Village Mahars" in M.N. Srinivas (Ed) *Caste its Twentieth Century Avatar*, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 156

root 'Pali' the language of the Buddhists canon that was copied on the model of Sanskritization.

There is new cultural and social renaissance which have transformed the Buddhist youth. They no longer believe in pre-ordained gate or in any of ancient rituals. Only hard work, education and a rational approach can bring progress, they believe. Compared to high caste Hindu youth, their attitude seems to be firm, progressive and scientific.[170]

Almost in all fronts of culture a visible Buddhist alternative has been developed by Bouddha community. To illustrate, Vinay Mahatre in his essay describes the importance of '*Jai-Bhim*', a greeting exchanged between Buddhists in Maharashtra. He observes that '*Jai-Bhim*' is synonymous to '*Ram-Ram*', the Hindu greeting and every Buddhist should respect the 'sacredness' of '*Jai-Bhim*' because "...it was Dr. Ambedkar who had discovered Buddhism for the Untouchable community and gave them new birth".[171] It is an assertion of new identity by using the tool of culture.

At community level the place of Hindu temples has been given to 'Buddha *Vihara*'. It is used as a community center for worship, where regular 'Buddha Vandana' is performed in front of the images of Ambedkar and Buddha. Here the relationship between the Bhikkus and worshippers is different from the relationship of Hindu priest and devotees. It is prohibited on the part of Bhikkus to demand *Dana*, offerings or sacred donation. They lead a secular life and perform the Buddhist rituals as duties. The numerous small and big Buddha *Viharas* in Maharashtra symbolize the commitment of Bouddha community in structuring their ritual practices in accordance with Ambedkar's teachings. In the recent past the control of Brahmin priests over the trust of Maha-Boddhi *Vihar* in *Boddha Gaya*, Bihar became the issue of confrontation. Nagarjuna Surai Sasai, who came from

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[170]Arun Sadhu, "Buddhism and Social Change among Mahars in Maharashtra", *Journal of South-Asian Studies*, XXI, 24, 1989.

[171]Vinay Mahatre, "Jai-Bhim Bol", *Dhammayug* (Annual Special), Nagpur, 2002.

Japan at the age of 22 and settled in Nagpur, is leading an agitation against the Brahmin authorities of Maha-Boddhi *Vihar* for its freedom.[172] This is a 'popular' struggle of neo-Buddhists to assert their right in obtaining their cultural space from the domination of Brahmins. They are also claiming the possessions of Karli, Ajanta, Ellora and thousands of other sites related to Buddha as their own.[173] Thus, the struggle for the control of Buddhist sites in India has become the rallying point for neo-Buddhists to legitimize themselves as the true inheritors of ancient Buddhist civilization.

Certain Hindu festivals and functions are not supposed to be performed by neo-Buddhists; all those which mark the destruction of a demon or evil are forbidden.[174] A Buddhist calendar is designed so that all Hindu festivals are abandoned while depicting new festivals and important dates to celebrate. *Buddha Purnima* and Dr. Ambedkar's Birth anniversary have a prominent place in this calendar. In a journalistic review over the celebration of Dr. Ambedkar's 112th Birth Anniversary in Dhamangaon, Maharashtra, Sujata Wahane mentioned a week long schedule that had been celebrated as 'Ambedkari Aathawada' (Ambedkarite Week). Public Meetings, social gatherings and cultural programmes were organised on this eve.[175] The recent calendar published by *Dhammayug* mentioned Savitribai Phule's birth date to be celebrated as '*Stri-Swabhiman Diwas*'. Among the Hindu festivals '*Nagpanchami*' is celebrated among the Buddhists of Nagpur because of its ancient link with Buddhism. Ambedkar felt that the *Nagas* were ardent Buddhists and Nagpur was their main citadel.[176] The Bouddha community has adopted a new Buddhist version for marriages and birthday ceremonies. These functions are different, simple and cheaper than the traditional Hindu method. Along with visiting sacred Buddhist sites like Boddha Gaya, Ajanta-Ellora, Sarnath and Sanchi, *Deeksha Bhumi* at Nagpur and *Chaitya Bhumi* at Mumbai also gained

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[172]Bhau Lokhande, "Shraman Arya Nagarjuna Surai Sasai", *Aaj ka Surekh Bharat*, (Special Annual Edition), Nagpur, 2005

[173]D.C. Ahir, *Buddhism in India after Dr. Ambedkar (1956-2002)*, Blumoon Books, New Delhi, 2003. p. 53

[174]Neera Burra, "Buddhism, Conversion and Identity: A case Study of Village Mahars" in M.N. Srinivas (Ed) *Caste its Twentieth Century Avatar*, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 163

[175]Sujata Wahane, "Ambedkar Jayanti Chirayu Ho", Buddhavani, Amravati, May-June 2003

[176]Valerian Rodrigues, "Dalits and Cultural Identity: Ambedkar's Prevarication on the Question of Culture", *Social Action*, Jan-March 2000, vol. 50, no. 1

new ritualistic importance in the religious itinerary of Buddhists. The rituals performed by neo-Buddhists are not meant to gain a status of purity in Hindu social order but it is an attempt to regain the 'cultural-capital' essential to build an independent, cooperative and cohesive character of a religious society.

The neo-Buddhists have developed a strong current of literary culture which depicts the collective commitments of society in carrying forward the ideological movement of Dr. Ambedkar. Zelliot has listed a large numbers of books, articles, poems, plays and essays of neo-Buddhists and calls it as 'Buddhist Literature'.[177] One common value which is continuously stressed in 'Buddhist Literature' is that the Buddhist conversion has freed them from psychological, cultural and spiritual domination of Hinduism and that they are free human beings now. Waman Kardak, a Buddhist poet summarized the social meaning of conversion in his song '14th October', the day on which Ambedkar himself converted, in the following words:

We have thrown away the rags

Which never did cover our shame... (Chorus)

The drum of bravery was beaten;

The frame of *chaturvarna* was broken.

Bhim's promise to Himself was fulfilled

The humble were freed

from the valley of untouchability.[178]

The process of Pali-ization has given a new meaning to the whole Dalit movement by constructing alternative model of belief system. Rituals, worshiping places, festivals, and literature of neo-Buddhists help to generate new meanings to their social existence. This religious universalism of Buddhists is contesting the 'Great' Brahmanic culture of Hindus.

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[177]Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, pp. 249-261

[178]Quoted from, Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, p. 259

- <u>Bahujan Hitay - Bahujan Sukhay:</u>

Ambedkar sees Buddhism as humanism. As a doctrine to liberate human being from the clutches of God-ordained religions it argues for the development of scientific temperament in all human beings for reaching the Ultimate Truth and the experience of Enlightenment. It became the religious doctrine of the oppressed and exploited masses around the world because it provides the tool to understand the reason of 'dukkha' and the way to combat it. Ambedkar argues that the salvation of Dalits in India lies in the destruction of caste system and in creating a social system conducive to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. He feels that only Buddha Dhamma upholds the moral values necessary to find a free society sans exploitation and religious corruption. Thus, conversion to Buddhism not only contributes in creating a robust moral sense, a dignified history and combating philosophy against Hindu theology but it also gives a vision of the future society. Buddhism as a social movement is an organised attempt by an enlightened community to bring upon a radical change in the total outlook of society. Conversion movement offers an emancipatory ideology facilitating self-determination and self-emergence for an oppressed community against the orders of caste ridden and patriarchal social system. *Bahujan Hitay-Bahujan Sukhay* symbolizes a better and happy life for the majority of oppressed people in the world.

Dalit women too have provided the basic foundation for Dalit identity and emancipation. Being thrice disadvantaged element of the society, a Dalit woman is subject to the patriarchal discrimination due to gender bias that is deeply embedded in the Indian society including the Dalits. Secondly, in the Dalit household she has to bear the *natural* dominance of traditional and orthodox customs without any opposition and thirdly, in all the spheres of her social life she has to face exploitative caste discrimination.[179] These three- fold exploitation drives her to the

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[179]Sulabha Patode, "Dalit Striche Tiheri Shoshan" *Sugava-Dr. Babasaheb Ambedhar Prerna Visheshank* (Dalit Mahilanche Prashna), Pune, 1998, p. 114

periphery of social development. Over 90 per cent of Dalit women are illiterate, uneducated and are denied access to resources both within the family and outside it. She is bound to do extensive manual labor both at home and in the fields. The socially constructed position of Dalit woman as dishonored has made her very vulnerable to caste and communal violence.

Women's position in Buddhism is unique. The Buddha gave women full freedom to participate in all spheres of social and religious activities. His move to permit women to enter the *Sangha* (Holy Order) was extremely radical for the times. Buddha confirmed that man is not always the only wise one; woman also is.[180] Nanda Waghmare, housewife, in her testimony to Rama Tambe revealed that being a Buddhist women she was aware that her 'position in family is as equal as her husband'.

> Buddha taught us equality between men and women... If in the coming
> future conditions are not favorable, I will work with my husband in
> vegetable market to run the household.[181]

Conversion to Buddhism provided a meaningful impetus to the feminist movement of the country. The social aspect of conversion movement locates the presence of persistent patriarchal values in the society as the product of traditional and conservative principles of 'Great' religions. Uma Chakravarti thinks that 'given the crucial connection between patriarchy and caste in Hindu society, perhaps Buddhism is the answer to Brahminical patriarchy.[182]

Dalits in India faced the worst kind of social exploitation under the aegis of the caste system. The Mahar caste in Maharashtra demonstrated their will to be liberated from the existing religio-cultural domination of Brahmanism by

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[180]Ibid. pp. 227-8

[181]Rama Tambe, *Dalit identity, Conversion and Neo-Buddhists: Past and Present*, PWS Publications, Nagpur, 1994, p.89

[182]Uma Chakravarti, "Is Buddhism the Answer to Brahminical Patriarchy?" in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (Eds) *Reconstructing the World. B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, Oxford University Press, 2004

embracing Buddhism. The neo-Buddhists call themselves 'Bouddha' with pride, for they are the inheritors of the great Buddhist civilization and are separate from the impure Mahar identity. They are ardent believers of the philosophy of Ambedkar as it was he who was responsible for introducing the great religious doctrines of the Buddha. His position in the Bouddha community is synonymous with God. In the various rituals of Bouddha community, Ambedkar's image occupies a sacred position along with Buddha's.[183] Notwithstanding these attempts it should be considered not as a 'blind faith' or making 'Ambedkar as an object of ritual worship' or violating the rational thoughts of Buddhism. They are recognised as *Ideal* beings to honor and emulate. Due to his great contribution to the emancipatory movement of Dalits, Ambedkar became for them the true inheritor of the Buddha, a *Bodhisatva* and an ideal to follow. Jaffrelot revisited the sites of conversion and quoted the following:

> Just as Gautam became Buddha by concentration of spirit, Bhim became Buddha by persevering exercise of knowledge. Strength, intelligence and Babasaheb Ambedkar's principles brought us life, magnificence and immorality. The speeches of Baba spoke about personality, about righteousness of spirit, justice and integrity. It was the moment when we begin to understand his speeches. I resolve to make mine these principles and to shape my life to come by them.[184]

Thus, from the above discussion it can be gathered that Hinduism is posing a monumental challenge to Buddhism. The current political system, still to a large extent, maintains the status-quo which strengthens the primordial caste, religious and parochial chauvinism. It attacks the spiritual and universal philosophy of modern politics which is developed to guarantee the welfare of every citizen. Conversion as a process questions the contemporary system built on enmity and competition. Buddhism encouraged the spirit of social co-operation and active participation in society not for self aggrandizement but for the universal good of the

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[183]Timothy Fitzgerald. "Ambedkar, Buddhism and Concept of Religion", in S.M. Michael (Ed) *Dalits in Modern India*, Vistar Publications, New Delhi 1999, p. 128
[184]Quoted in Quoted in Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004, p. 137

society. The moral principle of *Bahujan Hitay-Bahujan Sukhay* has had a limited appeal because of the antagonistic character of current social and political milieu. Against such odds Prof. Gopal Guru has an optimistic vision to see the relevance of Buddhist conversion movement. He says:

> Conversion is an ongoing process, that's why in the beginning it will seem incomplete. Tangible benefits and change accrue over time[185].

Marx distinguished between a 'class in itself' and a class for itself'. A class in itself is simply a social group whose members share the same relationship to the forces of production. Marx argues that a social group only fully becomes a class when it becomes a class for itself. At this stage its members have class consciousness and solidarity. Class consciousness means that false class consciousness has been replaced by the full awareness of the true situation, by a realization of the nature of exploitation. Members of the class develop a common identity, recognize their shared interest and unite, thus producing class solidarity. The final stage of class consciousness and class solidarity is reached when members realize that only by collective action can they overthrow the ruling class and when they take positive steps to do so.

Ambedkar also viewed that due to the discriminatory nature of Hindu caste society, conversion became an obvious choice for the depressed classes of the society to develop themselves into a 'class for itself'. The rejection of Hinduism has created a 'collective-community consciousness' among Dalits to establish a dignified position for them in the outer world. Buddhist conversion movement proposes a legitimate and revolutionary mode of struggle to the subjects of caste discrimination for their social emancipation. Being at the first stage, the conversion movement has to travel a long way to achieve the cherished goal of 'caste annihilation'.

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[185]Gopal Guru. "Choosing their Religion", *Outlook*, Nov. 18, 2002

Conclusion

> The problem of untouchability is matter of class struggle. It is a struggle between caste Hindus and untouchables. This is not a matter of doing injustice against one man. This is a matter of injustice being done by one class against another. This struggle is related to social status. This struggle indicates how one class should keep relationship with another class of people. The struggle started as soon as you started claiming equal treatment with others.[186]

> -Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

The contemporary churning of democracy in India has certainly been upheld by many political scientists as successful especially because it has brought up the concerns and objectives of the marginalized sections of India into the mainstream discourses of political activism. Concerning the political development of subaltern masses, many social scientists have judged it as a measure for 'radical change', 'democratic upsurge' and 'silent revolution' of the lower castes in modern India. The political assertion of Dalits and Other Backward Caste's (OBC) have been seen as the part of larger New Social Movements against the failure of two political variations, the liberal-democratic (Indian National Congress) and the Marxists (CPI and CPI-M) who 'failed to respond and reach out to the ideological needs and praxis that socially oppressed peoples and communities called for'[187] in the developmental ideology of modern India. Dalit movements were also regarded as an assault on the hegemonic appropriation of state power by the caste Hindu elites and their attempts to substitute it with a new ruling class termed as *Bahujans*[188]. Thus 'politicization of caste' is endorsed by many as the substitute to

[186]B.R. Ambedkar, "What way Emancipation", in Vasant Moon (compiler) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol.17 (III), Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 2003, p. 118

[187]Rajni Kothari, "Rise of the *Dalits* and the Renewed Debate on Caste" *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 25, 1994

[188]Barbara R. Joshi, (Ed) *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, Zed Books Ltd., London, 1986

communalism, as an important element of a secular polity and as a rational mean to democratize the society at its grass root level.

The existing phenomenon of identity politics is not only limited to the Dalit paradigm but the parallel rise of Right wing communal forces has also shown the failure of secular polity in combating the age old domination of Hindu cultural ethos on the social and cultural fronts. The homogenization of various castes into one umbrella identity as 'Hindu' is seen as a conspiracy of Brahminical Hindutva ideology to retain their cultural supremacy by employing democratic means. It presents a negative connotation as it perpetuates communalism, intolerance and parochial sentiments in public against the secular and liberal ethos of modern constitution. The Hindutvavadi right wing forces, banking upon an imaginary cultural and spiritual unity of Hindu population counter the objectives of western modernity and non-Hindu religions as alien to Indian 'soil' and proclaim an élan to build a fascist kind 'Hindu Rashtra' in India.[189] The other genre of identity politics related to the upsurge of lower castes is often recognized as progressive, autonomous and democratic movement with a positive outlook. This subaltern genre is welcomed by locating it as the representation of marginalized voices of socially, culturally and politically deprived sections against the domination of caste Hindu elites. It is observed that the control of power structure in all the arena of social life is hegemonised by the caste Hindu elites who are considered as the main obstacle in the path towards a true democratic revolution in India. It demands an equal distribution in power relations so that the benefits of development could reach to the disadvantaged masses.

It is often said that both these assertions, representing the social, political, economic and cultural concerns of two variant caste formations are the product of modern democracy in India. In the political developments of the last fifty years we have generally seen them acting against each other (barring exceptional cases in some regions) on various socio-political and cultural fronts. But an overview of the

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[189]See A.G. Noorani, *BJP and RSS the Distribution of Labor*, Leftword Publications, New Delhi, 2000

past accounts of struggle for power shows that the modern demonstration of difference between two ideological determinants is just another rehearsal of traditional antagonism existing between the subordinate and supra-ordinate class/castes in the past history of India. Democracy has just given a new face and a new meaning to the perpetual caste struggle without really breaking the four walls of caste system. Politicization of caste is wielded by the intellectual elites of the society to consolidate or raise its position which simply reproduces patterns of social dominance without affecting the prevailing or changing structure of society.

We would like to argue that democracy has failed in India to annihilate the caste system because it operates under the ideological paradigm of Hinduism. Caste is the core element of Hinduism on which the whole building has been erected. Consolidation of any caste on the basis of parochial interests begets in turn other caste groups, which perpetuate antagonistic relationships within the caste community and out of it. Hinduism as a doctrine of hierarchy and inequality is strengthened and consolidated in modern India because democracy has provided it a logical meaning by politicizing castes. It has reinvented and reconstructed the 'compartmentalization of castes' by putting a ladder in each compartment which is used by the elites of particular castes to ascend to the centre of power. This phenomenon endorses the fundamental doctrine of Hinduism which is primarily based on the existence of caste antagonism. Caste consolidation in the cases of subaltern masses appears positive in the sense that it rejects the hegemony of caste Hindus as their political masters, but a constant attachment with their 'given' caste identity and community culture represents a hurdle in achieving the objective of 'annihilation of caste' for a humane world and social democracy.

The subalterns, while allowing themselves an access to a broader discourse over rights and their share in power politics, followed a political map which leads them to a permanent consolidation of various caste groups against each other. Caste politics in this sense reflects an assertive articulation of one's caste concerns with the help of modern democratic means. The intellectual elite leadership of every caste exploits this situation by becoming the representative voice of the community

and registers its presence in the shared domain of power politics. Democracy thus helps in perpetuating the permanent differences among castes ordained by Hindu religion, in the most vocal and visible manner.

Ambedkar, different from the above mentioned perspectives, adhered to a humanist interpretation of Democracy. He observed that democracy, in the political sphere, stands for belief in 'one man one vote'. At the same time he also believed that democracy should be perceived as a possible instrument for the realization of the socio-economic aspirations of every citizen. He cautioned the new rulers of modern state that, if they failed in bringing social change for the masses, living under the dire exploitative conditions, they would destroy the framework of the 'laboriously built' modern polity. In the external sphere democracy adheres to rights and equality, but to enjoy it, social and economic conditionalities must be parallel to such libertarian values. He emphatically elaborated and enriched the concept of social democracy:

> Democracy is a mode of associated living. The roots of democracy are to
> be found in social relationship in terms of the associated life between the
> people who form society.[190]

What is significant about Ambedkar's view of democracy is that he did not regard democracy as a mere form of government, parliamentary or otherwise as was and is in vogue, but primarily as a mode of associated living. The basis of his democracy is humanistic and is consonant with the idea of human welfare. Its basis lies in rational human relations. The roots of democracy are to be searched in the social relationships, in terms of associated life between people who form a society.[191] That is why any sort of curtailment of human freedom, either in the form of distinction based on untouchability or caste system or class structure, appears to Ambedkar abominable and inhuman. Therefore, he struggled against these inhuman practices

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[190] Dhananjay Keer, *Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan. Bombay, 1987, p. 487

[191] B.R. Ambedkar, "Prospect of Democracy in India", in Vasant Moon (compiler) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol.17, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra), 1979, p. 519

by employing Buddha's doctrine in order to present an ideological prospect for a new world order based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

Hinduism for the subaltern masses represents a religio-ideological social system responsible for their dehumanized presence in society. Hindu as a political identity is nothing but a mask to conceal the permanently existing caste antagonisms among various castes. Presence of castes in modern India symbolizes the durability of Hinduism. Since caste is the core element of Brahmanic Hindu ideology, once it is destroyed, the hierarchical relationship among castes and other negative or positive connotations related to it subsequently comes to an end. Annihilation of caste probably holds out the key to end the upper caste elite domination based on 'superior birth', its cultural and spiritual hegemony, its degraded social psychology and finally the destruction of Brahminical Hinduism.

Ambedkar had employed Buddhism as a strategy in modern world with a distinct purpose to perform. He was convinced that Buddhism possesses a moral doctrine with two major objectives, firstly it is helpful in creating a non-communal political ideology and identity against other existing perspectives of political interventions and secondly as an apparatus of subaltern masses to bring radical changes in the socio-cultural relationships of Indian society. Buddhism provided a comprehensive socio-political and cultural alternative which is conducive to an effective functioning of democratic polity. Ambedkar assumes that conversion to Buddhism, at the first stage would decaste the Dalits from their primordial caste identity and in the progressive run to 'establish the kingdom of righteousness for the prosperity of the whole world' would counter the orthodox religiosity of Hinduism. In the battle between scientific temperament of Buddhism and the irrational doctrine of Brahmanism, the destruction of Hinduism is inevitable. Conversion movement as the emancipatory ideology of subaltern masses would be the force to radicalize society and instrumental in bringing about social, economic and political democracy in its 'true' sense.

The subaltern politics throughout the country have employed caste as ideology and identity to fight against the authoritative Brahminical hegemony and forgot the legacy and compatibility of Buddhist conversion movement. Politics of caste challenges the domination of one group of caste to exchange it with other, making caste identity as the main instrument of mobilization, thus endorsing the omnipresence of Brahminical ideology in regulating the democratic system. Buddhist conversion movement as a substitute to it, argues for the annihilation of caste based social system. It upholds an ideology based on social justice and equal opportunities. It represents a new moral self for the individual citizen in public to claim the benefits of liberal democracy. It constructs a positive collective culture of people based on fraternal and rational ethos and finally it symbolizes a vision for the reconstruction of society by bringing the issue of 'social democracy' in the mainstream debates of political development. Conversion movement further incorporates the potential values to change the discourse from narrow 'politics of caste' perspective to the greater 'democratization of society by destructing caste' idea, with a secular perspective, making sense of moral religions in the public domain.

The post Ambedkar Dalit Movements by *not* giving the needed importance to the socio-political and cultural notions of Buddhism had developed a strategy which is limited to the petty issue like representation in the power structure and caste based reservations. The agenda of social democracy is sidelined under the larger consensus build on political democracy. Modern democracy in India thus reflects the following three important characteristics concerning the nature of Dalit politics in India. First, it posed a blurred, narrow and a power centric perspective having limited effects on socio, cultural and economic status of community. Secondly, being the representative of particular caste/castes in politics it operates in the circle of hierarchal relationships without actually breaking the permanent pure-impure dichotomy. Finally, it upheld a strict and non-compromising attitude over the issues of leadership and over the question of participation in the broader struggles of social change. The characteristics presented here are the reflections of a fundamentally caste ordained political psychology of Dalit politics which failed to

articulate another dimension of Ambedkar's vision based on the libertarian ideology of Buddhist conversion movement.

Twenty-two Vows formulated by Dr. Ambedkar to be taken by Neo-Buddhists along with Triple-Refuge and Five Precepts[192]

Traditionally, the initiation of a lay person into Buddhism is considered complete once a person has taken formally the *Trisarana* (Triple-Refuge) and the *Pancha-Sila* (Five Precepts) from a *Bhikkhu* (monk). Dr. Ambedkar, however, considered this ceremony inadequate and incomplete. In order to remove this infirmity and to ensure that the new entrants renounce their old religion and customs fully and become good Buddhists, Dr. Ambedkar formulated twenty-two vows for the new entrants and administered the same as part of the historic conversion ceremony at Nagpur on 14th October 1956. These Vows are as Follows:

1. I shall not recognize Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh as gods, nor shall I worship them.

2. I shall not recognize Rama and Krishna as gods, nor shall I worship them.

3. I shall not recognize any other Hindu gods and goddesses.

4. I shall not believe in the theory of incarnation of god.

5. I do not believe that was an incarnation of Vishnu. I shall consider this to be false and propaganda or madness.

6. I shall not perform *shradha* nor shall I give *Pind-Dan*.

7. I shall not do anything which is detrimental to Buddhism.

8. I shall not allow any religious rites to be performed by the Brahmins.

9. I believe in the principle that all human beings are equal.

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[192] B.R. Ambedkar, "The Buddha Dhamma will be the Savior of the World" in Vasant Moon (compiler) Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol.17, Bombay, Education Department (Government of Maharashtra) 1979, pp. 530-533

10. I shall endeavor to establish equality.

11. I shall follow the Eight-fold Path of the Buddha.

12. I shall observe the ten *Paramitas* enunciated by the Buddha.

13. I shall be compassionate to all living beings, and I shall nurture them with care.

14. I shall not steal.

15. I shall not lie.

16. I shall not commit adultery.

17. I shall not take intoxicants.

18. I shall strive to lead my life according to the three principles of Buddhism- Wisdom, Morality and Compassion.

19. I hereby renounce my old religion, Hinduism which is detrimental for the prosperity of humankind, which is based on inequality, and accept Buddhism.

20. I firmly believe that only Buddhism is *Saddhamma*.

21. I believe that I am reborn.

22. I herby solemnly declare that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the teachings of the Buddha.

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